

# **Falling in Love with the Villainess**

— Akuyaku Reijo Ni Koi Wo Shite —

**- Volume 3 -  
In the Game – Strategy Part**

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**[ Hikki no Mori translations ]**

# Chapter 36

## The feeling of getting deceived

It had taken them one month to travel to the fief. Although that was quite a long distance and would usually make for a boring journey, for Ariel and Rion who knew next to nothing about the world outside of the capital's city limits, every day was rather enjoyable and brought new things to see. Not to mention, this trip became like their honeymoon, even though there was no such custom in this world. That was why no matter where they would go, it would without a doubt become enjoyable for them.

That said, they also had some disagreements, the first matrimonial quarrels they had experienced as a couple. Those were caused by Rion refusing to consummate the marriage. He kept saying that they should not do that kind of things until Ariel reached adulthood, a shockingly principled excuse that no one would expect to come from him.

Ariel, unsatisfied with that, continued to press him pointing out that age did not stop him from sleeping with other women in the past, heavily wounding his heart in the process. It was an incident that could be commemorated as the first time Rion got angry at Ariel.

But digressions aside, their journey was about to finish. At last, they had reached Bandeaux, their new territory. Their final destination was the town of Camargue, where the seat of the barony was located, but upon arrival, their mood changed completely and turned gloomy. The cause of that was the ambiance the territory gave off.

The highway they were traveling on was completely unmaintained, with rough surface and bridges so bad crossing them made one anxious. And if that wasn't enough, every person they passed by looked dispirited. They couldn't also fail to notice there were very few citizens on the road in the first place.

Rion was warned the territory was poor and offered little in taxes but he didn't expect it to be this ruined. Suddenly, he started feeling that he was deceived.

However, there was no deception on the King's side. The monarch himself was unaware of the actual state of things and that was something Rion would understand

soon after grasping the situation here.

Finally, Rion had arrived in Camargue. Just looking at the town's condition increased the weight in his heart. This place was a fortress on the kingdom's borders and unlike the capital, it carried a blunt aura.

As if that wasn't enough, the outer walls of Camargue were so heavily damaged, that in Rion's eyes they looked as if the town experienced war recently. To him and Ariel, with their knowledge of the world limited to what the capital offered, this place looked like an abandoned castle.

They had the feeling they came to a very outrageous place.

But even so, coming this far, it was not as though they could just turn their back on it. They had somewhere in mind to escape to if the need arose but that could be done at any moment, so they decided to enter the town for now.

As they approached the western gate, they saw an inner through the opening. The structure of the fortifications was different than in the capital, but Camargue was also protected by two layers of walls. It was an old town built for war.

That said, nowadays this feature was useless, the most recent war had been so long ago that none of the residents of Camargue remembered it now. That was also probably why the military installations located between the walls looked deserted.

The whole picture made a bad impression on town visitors.

"Halt! What is your business in this town?"

As they arrived at the gate within the interior walls, they were challenged by a soldier that emerged from the sentry post located to their right. As one would expect, they were to be inspected before passing the internal walls.

"I am Rion Frey, by the order of the king the new baron of the Bandeaux Territory."

"Eh? You are?"

The response of the gatekeeper made Rion feel down. Although he knew he did not look like a feudal lord, personally witnessing this kind of a reaction made him feel miserable.

“...Yes, I am”

“Ah! Excuse my rudeness, sir! Would you mind waiting while I inform the castle that you arrived?”

Seeing Rion’s displeasure, the gatekeeper immediately understood his mistake and instantly adopted a courteous manner.

“Oi! The new lord has arrived! Notify the castellan immediately!”

Prompted by the voice of the gatekeeper, a second soldier ran out of the sentry post in a hurry. Seeing that, Rion sighed deeply. It was not surprising to see those soldiers conduct themselves worse than those in the capital, but they also paled in comparison to the guards at the Windhill mansion. It made Rion question their ability to actually protect the border.

“I want to enter the city.”

“You shall be accompanied by the castellan, sir.”

“And you expect me to just stand here until he arrives, soldier?”

“I...”

“If I only need to head towards the castle, I can get there myself. I don’t expect it is to find?”

“No sir, I mean, yes sir, you are free to go, of course.”

“Well then, open the gate man.”

“At once!”

Although it was good that they followed his orders, it was overshadowed by the fact that they accepted his introduction and authority at face value on their first meeting. And Rion was the type to mind even the smallest details when it came to his subordinates.

When the gate was opened, the castle came to view immediately. With this, it was impossible to get lost. Ariel remained on the horse while Rion descended to the

ground and started to lead it by the reins.

As one would expect, the inner side of the wall was lined with buildings but they showed no signs of habitation. There was no such phrase in this world, but if Ryou was to describe this town in a concise way, he'd call it a "shuttered street".

"It seems terrible, doesn't it?"

"It does. To think that even the town is in this situation, rather than saying it hardly yields any tax, I wouldn't be surprised if I was told it brings none."

"Well, I would be surprised."

"...Eh."

It was the usual Ariel who couldn't get jokes.

The two of them headed towards the castle while being followed by stares from both sides of the street. The residents surprised by their sudden arrival couldn't tear their eyes off the two.

With Ariel this was obvious but Rion too was a dashing, handsome man of the type rarely seen in this poorly maintained town. Interested in the new arrivals the residents looked at them full of curiosity.

Their questions were answered nearly immediately by the person that came from the direction of the castle.

"Excuse me, are you perhaps the new lord?"

As he expected, it would still be this kind of reaction.

"Yes. I am Rion Frey. My wife, Ariel, is riding on the horse."

Assuming that this person was the castellan, Rion immediately introduced Ariel.

"Is that so..."

Different from the gatekeeper, this man did not try to hide his gloom. So even the castellan of this place was like this. One after another, the people here made Rion more

depressed with each meeting.

“My name is Cassius Rott, I work as the castellan of this place. Let me guide you to the castle. “

“...Lead on.”



Rion was uneasy about what kind of sights would welcome him in the castle but unexpectedly it was well maintained and looked nothing like an abandoned ruin.

Ariel felt the same.

“Mhm. Surprisingly, some tasteful things were on display, weren’t they?”

She began to recount her impressions while looking at the furniture in the room.

“You can tell that?”

“To some extent, it would be embarrassing if I had no appreciation for fine art.”

An eye for art was an indispensable ability for the nobles. Being sold a counterfeit and showing it to other members of society would be a source of enough embarrassment to make one avoid other people for a while.

Some people still failed, of course, and were ridiculed behind their back. But Ariel, being a daughter of House Windhill, would never let that happen to her, so she studied the subject hard and could safely be called a connoisseur.

“Well, I personally neither know nor care much about art. But it’s good to know we can sell them for good money to patch the budget.”

“Rion, that attitude is wrong.”

“Well...”

“Good things are expensive because they last longer. Obtaining one well-made item saves more money in the long run than buying many cheap ones.”

“...I know that much.”

“Do you? Or are you like those foolish people with poor judgment that think high price tag guarantees quality.”

“...I am sorry, Ari.”

It looked like Rion was one of the fools with poor judgment after all.

“Ehm, Sir, Madam, may I speak now?”

The castellan, whose existence was forgotten, interjected at this point.

“Ah, yes, go ahead.”

“Thank you... Where do you want me to start from?”

“Eh?”

Although he asked to be allowed to speak all he had to say was this? It almost made Rion think that he was being ridiculed.

“My predecessor left without warning, sir, and I was made to assume his duties in haste. I do not have a full grasp on the situation yet, I thought it would be best to start with the thing sir wants to know.”

“...What happened to the previous castellan?”

“He returned to the capital, sir.”

“Even though he did not hand his duties over properly? Isn’t that odd?”

“That is a question best asked to him, sir.”

“...Is it now.”

Although the behavior of the previous castellan irked him, he didn’t think much better of the current one. He did not expect the man to be loyal from the start, but he didn’t think a bit of professionalism was too much to ask for. He too had served another in the past, after all, and furthermore, he had performed his duties with loyalty and

dedication. He considered the castellan's behavior to fall short of the standard.

As a result, in his heart, he decided against relying on Cassius.

"Fine, I expect you to prepare all the documents I'm about to list."

"Yes, sir."

"I will need all the past and current budget balance ledgers, and a detailed breakdown of current revenue and expenses. I also want a report on the territory's trade goods and their market value. I don't expect it to be recent, but the more up to date the information, the better."

"...Eh?"

"Oh, yes. I also want a chart of local administration with a clear description of duties. As for the senior officials... I guess I'll have them introduce themselves later?"

"Ah, of course, sir."

"Good. I will personally interview them about the state of things, so warn them to prepare a report about the situation they are in and the problems they are facing."

"...Yes, sir."

"When will you have those documents ready?"

"...I will have to check and come back to you, sir."

"I want to familiarize myself with that information as a first priority, have them ready by tomorrow morning. As for the senior officials, arrange the interviews as their work allows."

"...Yes, sir."

"Enough of this, then. Do you have a map of the town?"

"I believe so."

"Bring it to me immediately. I will be heading out."

“Sir?”

“It will be hard to live here if I don’t know the place.”

“...Understood.”

“By the way, don’t worry about guides or escort. The only thing I need is a map.”

“The guards will...”

“I don’t need an escort. Judging by what I saw so far, I’m much stronger than any of your soldiers.”

Rion, who wasn’t in a habit to brag about his own strength, said this because he started to lose his temper. It was his way of declaring that he wouldn’t rely on any of them.

Rion’s first impression of the Bandeaux Territory was of the worst possible kind.



Before even an hour passed Rion could be already seen outside the castle.

He was walking around the town without referring to the map in his hand at all. In the end, he would have to return to the castle anyway and since it could be seen from all locations in town so it was impossible to actually get lost. Furthermore, what he was currently searching for is something that wouldn’t be drawn on the maps in any case.

(...Maybe it would still be fine even if I took Ariel with me. What a blunder.)

After walking for a while, these thoughts resurfaced within his mind again.

She was eager to go with him and it looked like the things he was worried about wouldn’t happen anyway. That being the case, he angered Ariel for nothing by forcing her to stay behind.

(Does this mean that this town is so unattractive that even the criminals won’t settle in it?)

What Rion was searching for was a lawless, slum-like area just like the one in the capital and the underground society that should exist in its shadow. He knew that they

were the best people to ask for the town's real situation. One could learn some really surprising things by sifting through the information that circulated in the capital's underworld. It was like looking for gems in a pile of gravel but for Rion, it would be enough. He wanted to know everything he could about his new territory.

In particular, he needed to learn why it ended up in such a poor state. Rion suspected the officials, including the castellan. That was why he wanted to obtain information from the local underworld but he couldn't find anything like that.

This was a huge miscalculation of his.

Far from being able to find a dubious downtown, he couldn't even find a sign of people living in the backstreets. It now looked to him like the town's population might be actually very low. That being the case, it wasn't surprising that there was no organized crime here. Outlaws didn't bother with things offering zero prospect of profit.

It seemed that the situation of this town was actually worse than he initially thought. If this was also the case for the rest of the territory, how should he even attempt to govern here?

It wasn't even a day since he arrived and he felt like running away already.



And on the second day, that feeling only intensified. Although it was still not past his deadline, none of the documents he requested the day before arrived.

So he called for the castellan, Cassius, to inquire about the reasons only to hear that...

"The documents do not exist?"

"Oh no, sir, we have plenty of them."

"...Then what stops you from bringing them here?"

"There is little fact in them, sir"

"I don't care, bring them over!"

Thinking that he was attempting to hide his embezzlement, Rion shouted at Cassius

but...

“But sir, reading them will make you misunderstand!”

The reply that the castellan offered was a little different from his expectations.

“...Misunderstand what?”

“Those reports are fraudulent, they are full of falsehoods.”

“Who did such a thing?”

“My predecessor and his subordinates.”

“Why?”

“To hide the fact they embezzled money.”

As Rion expected there were corrupt officials here but having his suspicions confirmed didn't make him happy. It only made him realize that the situation was more complex than he thought it was.

“Your predecessor was corrupt?”

“And not just the previous one, sir. The one before him, the one before that one and all the rest of them for a long time now. This has been the case ever since this territory became a part of the kingdom.”

This was plausible. Corrupt government officials weren't really that unusual. But even so, the way Cassius described it made him curious.

“And you had no part in that?”

“Of course not, sir. After all, we were never allowed any say in how the territory was governed.”

This too made Rion curious.

““We”?”

“We as the original inhabitants, sir, the people that have lived here for generations.”

“...I think it is time you told me the full story.”

Being urged by Rion, Cassius began talking about this region’s circumstances and history.

It went like this – In the past, there were several family clans that held power within the Bandeaux region. Although the place was not a part of any country it would be a stretch to try and call it one. But even so, the clans, by cooperating against any invaders, were able to preserve their autonomy. They were called the Six Clans of Bandeaux, the castellan was a member of one of them and headed clan Rott.

However, the land of Bandeau could not, in the end, go against the flow of the era and had to submit to the growing influence of the Grand Flamm kingdom in the west. However, due to the strength of their resistance during those times the territory was not handed over to any of the nobles and remained under a direct rule of the crown.

For those powerful local clans, rather than being a problem, it was actually a very much welcomed development at first. None of them would easily accept to follow another family after all. However, the reality of the situation proved different than what they expected.

The crown dispatched one of its officials to Bandeaux granting him full authority over the territory and demanded the clans to work as his underlings. That official’s status was uncommon as he was neither a vassal of the king nor a direct subordinate or even a follower of an aristocrat.

The worst part was that for government officials this new post on the eastern outskirts of the kingdom was akin to a demotion, so no one capable wanted to go there. And those of poor aptitude that did get sent, seeing a place where nobody could complain about them, neglected their job and indulged in luxury.

The land of Bandeaux steadily declined.

However, the misfortune of Bandeaux didn’t end just with that. Before they knew it, the unofficial status of their land changed from place to demote people to, into place that you reward people with so they can quietly retire. Somewhere to gain a bit of extra retirement income without putting in any effort.

As this kept continuing the economic situation turned so bad that people began to leave in droves.

And now a new lord was coming to such a place. Not yet another government official who would squeeze the assets for his own gain but a person to rule this place as his own.

There was suddenly a chance that Bandeaux might possibly change for the better. And whatever populace remained in the fief was expecting many things from the new lord.

“...Then the lord arrived and he was a child with heterochromatic eyes, a bearer of misfortune. And all those hopes were crushed.”

Hearing Cassius’ explanation did not lighten Rion’s mood, on the contrary, it made it turn even worse.

“...My apologies, sir, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Whatever. I’ve already gotten used to being scorned for my eyes and it is true I lack experience.”

“...I am truly sorry.”

Cassius could only repeat words of apology towards Rion who no longer hid his displeasure.

“Enough already, I really do not care about all that. So what you are saying is that the financial documentation is not only inconsistent, it’s completely made up in order to hide the previous official’s embezzlement from me and anyone else remaining that would try to investigate it...”

“Exactly, sir.”

“...And that there are no other legitimate records left...”

“Yes, sir.”

“...And that we have no actual idea about how much tax does the territory bring?”

“...Yes, sir.”

“Do we even know who should be paying what and when?”

“...We do not.”

“Then how am I supposed to govern this land?”

“.....”

“Go and investigate this instant!”

“At once!”

Cassius immediately left the room just as Rion ordered. But to be honest, Rion did not expect much. Just because he could ask people inexperienced with the administration, like the castellan, to do something didn't mean they would know how to do that thing.

He just wanted the guy to leave the office.

“I should have been more skeptical. Being given land and rank just like that is not a normal occurrence after all.”

“You're right.”

Even though Rion was looking and sounding troubled Ariel was still enjoying this situation. When he had been a valet, Rion kept all his emotions to himself, never uttering complaints. And now that she became his wife she could finally see this side of him too.

“So what should I do now?”

“Hmm? Haven't you made up your mind already?”

“...It will be troublesome, though.”

“I have told you once already. As long as I'm with you, I don't mind anything else.”

“I see. Right, I'll try to keep at it a bit longer then.”

“Good.”

Rion wouldn't be disheartened by something like this. He had faced situations much more absurd and much crueler, for he had faced the world itself.

# Chapter 37

## The First Undertaking as the Feudal Lord

Rion ordered the castellan, Cassius, to gather information necessary to govern the land but, as before, that man wasn't able to procure the data immediately. There was not a single person left in Bandeaux that could be called a civil official.

Until recently, everyone working in the territory's administration was a central government employee dispatched by the capital. Taking advantage of Rion's assumption of office, they had all either abandoned their duties without a word or departed the territory leaving resignation letters behind. They saw no more prospect of easy profit, so, in their minds, they no longer had any business there.

The municipal office building of Camargue was completely empty and the government of Bandeaux had stopped functioning altogether. After all, there could be no administration with no officials on the ground.

In such a situation, no matter what Rion would try to do, hardly anything would be effective. But finally, after much time spent on mulling over ideas and listening to reports, he had found a plan that could work, one he was currently trying to execute.

The soldiers in front of him were fixing the last pieces of armor and shuffling around to establish their formation. This sight marked the very first time he had been impressed by something, ever since he had arrived in Bandeaux.

Even though their lives were rough at the moment, the Six Clans of Bandeau, that once had stood their ground against the kingdom, not only looked strong but were also proving themselves to be so well drilled and disciplined, that even Rion, a complete novice at warfare, couldn't miss it.

"They'll be in formation soon, sir."

The same was true for Cassius Rott, who radiated much more dignity in an armor than when he had been acting as the castellan.

He no longer held that position either, with the territory under a direct control of a

feudal lord a castellan was no longer required. Therefore, he returned to his former role of the captain of the Bandeaux Territorial Army.

“Can you answer a question in the meantime?”

“Sir?”

“Why do the bandits have such a splendid hideout?”

What the soldiers were about to attack was a den of brigands. A surprisingly well-constructed one, a fact Rion couldn't possibly miss.

Although it looked old, it boasted impressive dimensions and a rather high wooden stockade which even had a moat dug out around it. The place looked like a proper military stronghold.

“This is a fortification that had been used during the wars of old. It's one of a chain of forts that once marked the border of a foreign country.”

“Are you saying there are more places like this?”

“Yes, sir. Quite a number of them.”

“And you're not going to tell me that all of them have been infested by bandits, are you?”

“...Unfortunately, sir, they have.”

Rion's question was sarcastic and this unexpected answer made him feel dizzy and nearly fall from the horse.

“...Is that why you have not eliminated them yet?”

“...We would suffer high casualties assaulting those forts. After taking on few groups the troops would become too weak to suppress banditry effectively.”

“...Would they now?”

Cassius was lying. Rion was able to grasp that fact and he thought he could understand the reason too. When poor people were no longer able to put food on the table, they

could only turn to crime. Rion, with his first-hand knowledge of slums, understood that perfectly.

All those numerous bandit groups were most likely created by the former inhabitants of the fief. Cassius and his people, with their deep ties to the area, probably knew about that too.

“Sir, are we really going to assault this place?”

Cassius asked to substantiate Rion’s intentions.

“Of course. That’s why we came here.”

“Is that so... So be it, I’ll issue the orders.”

“Ah, no need.”

“Sir?”

“I do not require the assistance of your troops.”

“Huuhh!?”

Cassius, who looked like he resolved himself to go ahead with the attack and was about to give orders to his subordinates, was stopped by Rion’s words. He had not yet learned that Rion was quite stubborn and that once he decided he wouldn’t rely on someone, he would stick to that decision.

“Let us go Ariel.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Rion headed towards the fort with Ariel at his side. Although Cassius was taken aback by this action, remembering his duty, he followed them in a hurry.

However, nearly immediately, his legs stopped moving.

“What on earth!?”

A gigantic fireball and a huge tornado appeared in the no man’s land and both rushed

towards the stockade. Before reaching the wooden wall, the fire and the wind merged into one raging, infernal whirlwind. Then, a loud sound of destruction reverberated across the field.

The sky started raining small, charred chunks of wood.

“...Isn’t this absurd?”

A huge part of the stockade was blown away without a trace.

“Now be good and surrender or the buildings will go next!”

Rion’s yell resounded. There could be no doubt, the spell a moment ago had been certainly cast by the two of them.

“Who on earth are they?”

They were nobles, so, obviously, they would be able to use magic. But common sense dictated that their strength should be proportional to their rank. And it was unthinkable for a mere baron to be wielding spells of this magnitude. This made everyone wonder why Rion was still only a baron despite his obvious power and changed the way Cassius viewed him.

At the same time, the bandits were scared witless by Rion’s magic. If that kind of power was to be used against them the end result would be a one-sided slaughter. Because their biggest desire was to survive, they could not handle such terror.

After Rion and Ariel’s spell destroyed the stockade, the bandits started coming out in small groups to surrendered one after another.

The bandit subjugation attempt was an undisputed success and ended without a fight.



The bandits were restrained and lined up. There were many old people, women, and children among them. It was almost as if a whole village picked up banditry one day.

“...Sir, what do you plan to do with them?”

Cassius was trying to find out how Rion would deal with the bandits. He looked

worried and it was plainly obvious he wanted to protect them. And that he was not a very good negotiator.

“What is the customary punishment for banditry?”

“Well... That depends.”

“It’s not a capital offense?”

“It is in some cases...”

The honest answer would be that bandits were punished with death in most circumstances. The law of the kingdom had no mercy for the criminals. It followed the school of thought that treated extreme punishment as the best form of deterrence.

“Who has the final say?”

“The head of the territory, sir.”

“And that would be me, right? Now then, what to do...”

Rion, troubled and thinking over his options, lifted his finger to his brow as was his custom. However, from the perspective of bandits, this looked like he was just trying to play with their lives.

“...Don’t fuck with me.”

One of the bandits that couldn’t suppress his anger any longer raised his voice. This was a spark that set the flames of unrest alight.

“He’s right! It’s not as though we wanted to become bandits in the first place!”

“What they said was right! We were starving, we only did this to survive!”

Just like that, the captives started shouting one after another. But Rion only stared at them with a cold glare and Ariel was looking more irritated by the minute. Neither of them could agree with what the bandits were saying.

“Silence! Quiet down, fools! You are just aggravating your sins! Behave yourselves!”

Cassius, who noticed the couple's reaction, was desperately trying to calm down the prisoners. However, unable to see his intentions and worry, the bandits had no plans of stopping.

That bravado caused Rion to snap.

"Cassius!"

"S-sir, a moment please, I'll calm them down in a snap."

"This is enough! I will shut them up myself!"

Those words were much more effective than Cassius' desperate attempts at persuasion. The bandits, understanding the meaning of being personally silenced by Rion, instantly stopped talking and started trembling with their eyes looking at the ground.

"...You there."

"....."

The bandit who shouted first was now on all fours looking shrunken from fear. He thought that meeting Rion's eyes right now meant death. Many others felt the same.

"...Heh, fine, any of you bastards will do. Have you ever eaten bread so bad it was colored in various hues of blue?"

No one answered that question. Not just because they were scared but also because hardly anyone there had done so.

"Have you ever felt forced to eat something so sloppy and rotten, that you could just barely tell by feel that it once was meat?"

This question too remained unanswered. Not a single bandit had experienced such a thing.

"...Sir, what could you be possibly talking about?"

Cassius asked, failing to comprehend the meaning behind Rion's questions. However, Rion's eyes stayed fixed on the bandits.

“Nobody? Hah, haven’t you shits had a better life than I had then?”

“Eh...?”

“I have been eating such things regularly. Back then I considered that better than eating dirt but, now that I look back at those times, people that chewed mud tended not pass out from food poisoning. Sadly I was a stupid kid that did not know better.”

“.....”

Cassius and everyone else present was dumbfounded by Rion’s tale.

“You see, I grew up in the royal capital slum. I ate what I could scavenge from the capital’s garbage heaps. And even for that garbage, I had to fight viciously, sadly with little success due to my small body. The food scraps, like those I described, were the best I could hope for.”

“.....”

“I’m not really trying to boast about my misfortune but I am very irritated by how you bastards whine about yours. Especially when all of the orphans in the capital slum were, and still are, living as I did then, with only the luckiest surviving.”

All that was true. Not having parents to help made it next to impossible for the orphans to survive in the slums. The fact that Rion was able to live past childhood could be called an exceptional piece of good fortune and even that was only thanks to the perverts attracted by his beauty that gifted him food.

“So I care nothing for your excuses and I will punish you for the crimes you committed. Keep that in mind as you await your fate.”

Not a single person amongst them felt able to voice further complaints. There were people elsewhere living and dying in much more dreadful conditions than those they personally thought too harsh to keep enduring. The fact that, now that they were made aware of it, they were able to reflect on this knowledge, showed they did not lose their humanity yet.



The bandits were subjugated without a single casualty. The mission was unmistakably a huge success.

However, when Cassius and the others returned to Camargue, their faces were grim. All people currently working in the castle were the original inhabitants of the land. And exactly as Rion expected, they not only knew the bandits' circumstances but even had family ties with the captives.

They just couldn't feel happy that this mission succeeded.

Furthermore, they were able to witness the astonishing strength of Rion and Ariel's magic. If he was to keep using that strength, all of the remaining bandit strongholds were guaranteed to fall as well. This would keep increasing the number of people arrested and charged with crimes. Although that was not unjust, as those people did become bandits, castle employees couldn't shake off the bond formed by blood and shared harsh circumstances of life.

"There is no other way, I should petition the baron."

Cassius' subordinates, although a bit scared, jumped onto their boss' idea and they all went to Rion's office.

Within it, Rion was visibly troubled while thinking about how to proceed. Ariel, in the meantime, was sitting on the sofa in front of him, enjoying the situation.

As far as Cassius and his people were concerned, Ariel too was quite a strange existence. She was only doing what Rion wanted and merely duplicating his actions. In addition, she exhibited no desires or objectives of her own simply acting the unusual part of a very devoted wife. Her seeming to have no personal agenda was a really puzzling attitude that Cassius' group could not understand.

"Ahem, sir..."

"...What now?"

Rion welcomed Cassius with displeasure from the start. He had never liked having his train of thoughts interrupted. If it was Ain and the others, they would wait with the questions until he showed the signs that his thoughts were collected, like lowering the

finger from his brows. Unfortunately for the former castellan, he did not yet know Rion's habits.

"The punishment of the bandits..."

"That again? I have mostly decided on what to do with them. You interrupted me while I was mulling over the final details."

"I apologize, sir. What is to be their fate?"

"Divide them into three groups. Put those with blood on their hands in the first group and those that did not actively participate in any criminal acts in the second. The last group will be for those who admit banditry but deny murder and those that kidnapped women to exploit their body."

"...I understand clearly, sir. As for their punishment?"

"Heavy labor for the bandits. I want them to start by repairing the road to the capital. They have two months to accomplish that or additional punishment will be handed down. You are to execute anyone who tries to run or neglect his tasks."

"That's..."

"I will hear no objections. Those that did not commit banditry are sentenced to serfdom. They will reclaim and cultivate abandoned farmland, all fruit of their labor will be collected by the barony. I am yet undecided on how long will the punishment last and shall announce that later."

"Yes, sir..."

"As for the killers... Murder should be punished by death but manpower is precious and it would be a waste to simply kill them. I want them to do forced labor and I want it to be so hard they would wish to die instead. Can you think of anything suitable?"

"No sir, but I'm sure I'll find something appropriate."

Cassius looked pained by the harsh punishment and was certain to find them a task that would not be sufficiently severe. Rion could see through his intentions from the start.

“Tell me Cassius, have you ever considered the feelings of the family and friends of the murder victims?”

“I...”

“Do not assign them work that’s not sufficiently severe. If you cannot find anything suitable, have them all executed.”

“...So be it.”

There was no room for pleas of leniency. Cassius and his group witnessed the sternness of their new lord first-hand.

“Good. However, we still have a problem.”

“A problem, sir?”

“We have no money to fund all this.”

“...What use is money in this case?”

“Do you think we can operate forced labor without feeding the prisoners? Would they even be able to survive that?”

Rion settled on speaking to Cassius in a sarcastic way.

“No, I believe it would not.”

“Then we clearly have to prepare food for them. And that obviously requires a budget.”

“...Have to prepare food?”

“Isn’t that an obvious thing to do? Not feeding them pretty much makes this a death penalty. And I did not sentence them to death.”

“...That is true, sir.”

And like this, the more Cassius spoke to Rion, the less he could understand him. This was a lord that could hand down heavy punishments and in the same breath worry about offenders’ welfare. It was not a question whether he was strict or gentle. He was

unmistakably strict, what Cassius was uncertain about was whether he was also kind or just holding an ulterior motive.

“However, the purse of the barony is empty and I cannot find a solution. Can you think of any other methods to provide the food?”

“That... No, I can not, sir.”

If they had, they would have done that a long time ago – those feelings were clearly seen in Cassius’ attitude. And due to this, his affinity with Rion was pretty bad. Rion thought it was too early to give up on looking for a solution and he treated Rott’s behavior not even as a display of incompetence but as an abandonment of responsibility. And he would never delegate tasks to someone like that.

However, he still had no idea what to do with the problem of money. No matter how much he racked his brain, he found no good solutions.

And then, suddenly, a leather bag was placed in front of him.

“Ariel?”

Ariel was the one to put it there.

“I might be offering this too soon, but use those.”

“This bag is...?”

“I received it from Mother. Not being able to provide me with a dowry, at the very least she wanted to offer me a farewell gift.”

“Then this is your personal property. I cannot possibly use it.”

“But I was told by Mother that I should use this if the time comes when Rion is really troubled. You certainly look troubled right now.”

Hearing this conversation, Cassius and his group relaxed and gentle expressions crept onto their faces. They saw Ariel’s act of goodwill a lovely display of consideration by a young wife. That was indeed true but at the same time, they were misunderstanding many things.

The first one was the reason for the lack of dowry. They simply assumed that the parents failed to provide one due to a lack of money. To be honest, that was reasonable thought for people that did not know Ariel's lineage.

But Rion was different. He knew very well how much Marchioness Windhill lacked the common sense.

"...In that case, I'll just have one."

This, in turn, was taken by the group as him showing consideration towards his young wife.

"Only one? I believe Mother had put many in there."

"Only one for the time being. I am certain that will be enough."

"...I see. Fine, one coin."

Ariel was somewhat displeased by her goodwill not being fully accepted.

She also still didn't know the value of money. And Cassius' group understood that as soon as they saw the single coin that she had taken out of her bag. All of them froze while their jaws hit the floor.

What she held in her hand was a golden coin. One with the crest of the Gran Flamm royal family.

There were many types of gold coins in circulation. Setting aside those issued abroad, there were several known gold coins minted within the country. Because they varied in size and purity of material, even though they were all gold coins, they were valued differently. The official gold coin of the Gran Flamm kingdom had the highest value of them all.

"...Err, isn't that the kingdom's?"

Cassius, who came to his senses first, asked timidly. It was the first time that he had ever seen the official gold coin of the kingdom. Others were the same.

"...The official gold coin."

“Don’t tell me...”

There were still more coins within the leather bag. If all of them were to be like that one... It was unsurprising that they started to imagine things like that.

“Let me repeat, this is my wife’s personal property. Therefore this coin too will be just a loan.”

“Rion, that is something I have given to you.”

Ariel voiced her dissatisfaction before Cassius managed to say anything.

“If you gifted it to me alone, I would take it gladly. However, this time you offered it to the territory and its lord, thus the territory is obliged to pay you back.”

“Why the distinction?”

“Discussing it in front of the involved party, eh?... Well, why not. The main reason is that I do not trust the people here.”

Indeed, that was not something one should say outright in front of the people being spoken about. The faces of Cassius and his group contorted in anger upon hearing this pronouncement.

“Oh? Speaking such a thing so frankly, isn’t my husband rather angry at them?”

“That’s an understatement. They are the same as the bandits we captured. All talk and full of excuses.”

Rion kept offering sharp criticisms as if the people involved weren’t here. Not being able to bear it any longer, they attempted to complain about this kind of treatment but Ariel again replied before them.

“I think you are right. They complain so much but never seem to be doing anything.”

“Exactly. Before, they had left all the responsibilities to the official sent by the capital. But when that person did nothing they should have acted themselves. However, none of them actually attempted to do anything. And that should not be the case if they truly cared about this land.”

Hearing that, the angry faces suddenly turned pale.

“But I think I heard they did not have the authority.”

Ariel didn't say this to try to excuse them. Those words were spoken to expose the true source of Rion's anger for the sake of Cassius and the others.

“If they did nothing just because they feared punishment for overstepping their authority, then they were really only thinking about themselves all the time. Besides, no authority? Who else was above them when the last official left and we were yet to arrive? Who stopped them then from giving relief to the suffering people? They are just a group of lazy, privileged locals, who placed their naive selfishness on the upcoming new lord.”

“I cannot disagree.”

All the pale faces now turned red from great shame.

“For them, it's the outsiders that should make things better and the outsiders that should fund that change. They seem so happy with that prospect, don't they? Don't they look perfectly content to just receive things too? Shouldn't they instead just take things into their own hands to save the land they supposedly care about oh-so-much? I just find their attitudes so hard to believe.”

The denizens of the slums that Rion knew from the royal capital were enthusiastically working for the benefit of their neighborhood. And they were the undisputed dregs of society. That was why Rion would never recognize Cassius and his group as partners or subordinates.

“So in conclusion?”

“I care not for people that merely wait or even expect to be given things. Their demands only grow with time and can never be appeased. I will not allow wasting Mother-in-law's consideration on such an undertaking.”

“And that is how things look gentlemen. So? What are you all going to do now?”

With a smile on her face, Ariel queried Cassius and his group. There was no more mystery about her. She was radiating a dignity of someone that should be standing above others.

“We will serve the lord with our lives on the line.”

Before answering they all knelt down and bowed their head together.

However, even this was met with Rion’s cold reception.

“Save your words, I do not need pledges. You want to serve someone, serve this land and its people.”

They raised their faces surprised by the answer but Rion was already ignoring their presence immersed in his thoughts.

They did not yet understand that Rion’s trust could be only gained by deeds, not words.

# Chapter 38

## The First Step Forward

Although he had become a fief lord, Rion's daily schedule didn't really undergo much change. He simply allocated the period of time formerly dedicated to his duties as a valet to performing the tasks demanded of the fief lord.

He never abandoned his pre-dawn physical training sessions and those were, in fact, continuing even after his arrival to Bandeaux. One could even say that he was more keen on them than before.

Back when he had experienced real combat, by fighting against one of the demons during the event, he thought that he had become considerably strong. However later, when he had stormed the execution site to rescue Vincent, he literally couldn't do anything against the knight commander.

The defensive magic of Diane, that he considered his trump card, wasn't even able to react against the swordsmanship of the enemy. The magic assault of Sarah didn't even have time to start.

Every time he recalled that fight, he felt ashamed of his conceit.

He was still inexperienced. He had to forge himself to obtain the strength required for defeating the knight commander. Fueled by that determination, he trained zealously. But the results weren't good.

Rion reached the limits of self-learning and polishing his swordsmanship on his own. The problems he identified when he had still been in the capital were yet to be solved. It left him wondering if there were any other methods to pursue. Before he knew he stopped swinging his sword and immersed himself in his thoughts.

"My lord baron."

A voice suddenly woke him up from his ruminations. He knew who that was just from the sound.

“Cassius, huh?”

“It is me, milord.”

Cassius, the former castellan, that now served as the commander of the territory’s army. A person that Rion personally wouldn’t wish to see out of his own will. He still didn’t trust the man or, for that matter, anyone else he had met here ever since his arrival.

“Do you need anything?”

“No, milord, I was simply passing by. Noticing I was not alone made me curious.”

“Is that so.”

If he had no business then the conversation was over. Rion refocused on his training and prepared the sword. In the end, the only thing he could do was more practice swings. So he decided that he should put his thoughts aside for now and just execute them diligently but...

“If my lord doesn’t mind, may I serve as a sparring partner?”

“Eh?”

Cassius brought up an unexpected proposal.

“Practicing swinging your blade helps to build good foundations but, in my humble opinion, it does not offer any further benefit.”

“...Are you strong?”

“That I do not know. But I have been learning the sword ever since I was a child.”

“Is that so... Fine, spar with me.”

Since Cassius recommended that himself, Rion would gladly use him. After all, it was exactly what Rion wanted.

“At once, lord.”

Rion waited while Cassius took the position in front of him. As soon as they raised their swords, he immediately understood that the former castellan was really just being humble.

Ki Aura erupted from the man's body. He intended to overpower Rion completely.

"...Here I come."

Cassius seemed to take just a few slow steps, yet, suddenly, Rion found himself right in front of him and in the path of a blade in a downward swing. He immediately raised his sword horizontally to guard but the force of the blow was tremendous. He felt he would be crushed on the spot if he remained there.

He managed to escape at the last moment by deliberately falling backward and used the distance gained with that maneuver to stand back up.

"Hoh..."

Cassius voiced his admiration.

"What are you acting amazed about, you were a wolf in sheep's clothing all this time, weren't you."

"I was never really feigning weakness. I am but a simple man that knows nothing besides the sword, couldn't help getting nervous when told to govern the castle."

"...And the way you talk is different, too. So this is the real you, huh?"

"Well... In the end, I am a soldier before all else."

His former humble way of speaking nowhere to be seen, Rion could feel pride from this new Cassius that looked and behaved like a military man.

"...Bring it on, then. After all, if my opponent doesn't have at least this much strength to practice against, I won't be able to beat the knight commander in the future."

"What?"

"This time, I'll be attacking. Here I come!"

Yelling out the line Cassius used a moment ago, Rion tried to shorten the distance. However, his opponent was not going to let him approach and swung his sword from overhead with a staggering force.

Rion was able to somehow avoid this blow but a horizontal follow-up strike from Cassius could not be evaded. Unable to properly receive that one, Rion felt his stance collapse.

“...Mhm.”

Again, Cassius muttered to himself.

“This is somehow irritating. Okay, this time I’ll go for real.”

Or so Rion thought as he charged at Cassius again but this time he was defeated perfectly. Without even being able to cross swords properly, he received a direct hit and crumpled into a heap.

And from that point on, this had become Rion’s daily routine.



☘☘Those bastards. They are just venting their grudges.”

Rion was lying on the bed and complaining incessantly. Ariel was enjoying seeing that side of him for the first time while tending to his arms, both of which were heavily bruised and covered with medicinal herbs.

Rion’s morning training had truly changed into a somewhat improved one. If being covered in fresh bruises every day could be called an improvement, of course.

He also obtained more sparring partners than just Cassius. Four people had visited his exercise spot so far and took turns training with him.

All of them were leaders of the Six Clans of Bandeaux.

Apart from Cassius, who headed clan Red, there was also Kiel Blau of clan Blue, Mo-Heitor Grün of clan Green and Apollo Gelb of clan Yellow.

They employed different fighting styles but each of them was strong. Although the

extent of Rion's abilities was still unknown, no matter how much he tried he couldn't land a hit on them.

Each time they sparred he ended up being one-sidedly beaten, earning himself another collection of bruises as a result. The worst ones, that were almost proper injuries, could be healed by Ariel's magic. But the end result was an undamaged but battered skin covered by red and blue bruises, where the color of one part of the body differed from another. It looked really amusing.

And it made Ariel laugh.

"If it makes you complain that much, why not stop?"

She asked well aware of Rion's likely answer.

"Won't happen. If I can't even beat them, I won't be able to beat the knight commander either."

"Is he stronger?"

"I don't know. I'm not experienced enough to tell. However, someday, I'll be strong enough to find out. No, I'll get even stronger than that..."

Glaring at nothing in particular, Rion put his determination into words. Ariel could feel the bloodthirst emanating from his body as he said that.

"Oh my, how scary. Which Rion is currently in control? Judging by the dangerous aura... Is it the one raised in the slums?"

"...Oh, no, it's not like we replace each other."

Rion's bloodlust melted away before Ariel's jest.

While they still had been in the capital, Rion had told Ariel everything. He had thought it would be unfair to let her marry him while keeping secrets.

He had felt anxious about her potential reaction but, in the end, his fears had proved groundless. That had been because Ariel had already held suspicions that Rion was not just an ordinary orphan from the slums. Not due to the strength of his magic but because of his speech and conduct.

His knowledge that had been alien to Ariel, his unusual way of thinking and, most noticeably for her, his habit of occasionally using peculiar words never before known to this country.

His ideas about spirits had been a very good example of this. Although the word spirit existed, the concepts of Salamander, Undine, and Sylph had been unheard of this country and perhaps even the whole world. That had raised an obvious question of where would Rion have learned that. And though she had not by herself considered that the answer might lay in a different world, she had not been really surprised when Rion told her that. And neither had she required much convincing.

That being the case, she would just accept Rion's words on face value regardless. Ariel couldn't really care less about who, or what, he actually was. That was just how deeply Ariel, a noble lady from a marquess lineage, fell in love with Rion, an orphan from the slum.

"...But Rion."

Ariel's face moved in closer to Rion's as she was staring into his eyes.

"Yes, Ari?"

"Your left eye is shining right now."

"Eh? Is it really brighter than the right?"

"Yes... It's rich crimson... Beautiful."

"...Ari."

Rion put his hand on her cheek and kissed her gently. His other hand was already on Ariel's waist. He pulled her slender hips closer. Suddenly, just like that, they changed places and he was on top of her.

His hand left her face and slowly wandered towards her chest. The other hand started to slowly creep downwards.

"...Ah."

And then, Rion regained his senses, released her body and laid down at her side.

“Muu...”

Ariel’s cheeks puffed up as she showed her discontent. This seduction attempt ended in failure too.

“Whew, that was close. I almost lost myself.”

“And where’s the crime in that? We are husband and wife.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Do you feel nothing towards me?”

“You know that’s untrue. Just a while ago, I was about to... Ah?”

Rion finally noticed that he might have been worried about something stupid all along.

“Rion?”

“Nevermind that. You see, I always felt repulsed by a woman’s body. It feels... Filthy. Something to grudgingly bear with when I had to sleep with others before.”

“...I don’t understand?”

A story about past affairs, no matter of its contents, was never pleasant.

“All this time I was worried that I might feel the same about you.”

The abstinence until adulthood was just an excuse. Rion had always hated the times when he had to bed a woman. Seeing them drown in their own lust disgusted him to no end.

And all this time he had been worried that he might feel the same about Ariel whom he loved deeply.

“...Is this why?”

“Yeah. That’s why I have avoided the issue all this time.”

“I see. And now?”

“Until now, I did not dare to try to embrace the woman I desire. But it looks like my body seems to share none of my fears and it has acted on its own.”

“Meaning?”

Ariel understood what Rion was trying to say. But even so, she wanted to hear it from his lips.

“...I think we don’t have to wait to adulthood anymore?”

“Idiot.”

With a smile on her face, Ariel entrusted the weight of her body to Rion. It was finally the time for the two to unite in marriage...

“...Hurts.”

...Or not.

“Eh?”

“My whole body hurts.”

Rion’s body wouldn’t cooperate.

“...Then we can’t do it before you’re healed.”

“Eeeh? But I train daily...”

Far from getting better, he would get more and more battered by his morning training sessions. He could only heal completely once he was able to properly match the sword of Cassius and the others. And that would take...

“Muu... I don’t know anymore.”

The time they had been waiting for had finally arrived but with the situation turning out like this even Ariel would turn peevish.

Eventually, she ended up scolding him again by stimulating the most painful bruises on purpose.



Later that day, during the time he designated for his work as the fief lord, Rion was in an even more foul mood than usual.

He had finally overcome the mental block stopping him from making love to Ariel but still found himself unable to do the deed. He was going to use those who injured his body to give a vent to the resulting annoyance.

Rion knew that, in truth, he was just sulking, so he wouldn't go as far as finding faults with everybody and everything. He was instead deliberately ignoring their existence.

Grasping the mood of their lord, Cassius and the others present in the office felt uncomfortable. But it wasn't like they could just leave the room because of that. Even if that probably was what Rion wanted, they were certain it would not help them earn his trust.

And thus the only sound in the oppressive atmosphere of the room was Rion's pen scratching on paper.

"A message for the lord!"

Finally, someone showed up disrupting that awkward situation. It was one of the soldiers on sentry duty at the gates.

"Speak."

"There is someone requesting a meeting with you, lord."

"With me? Who is it?"

Ever since Rion took over the fief, he had his hands full with getting a grip on the situation of his land and barely had any external contacts. Therefore, there was a limited amount of people that could possibly wish to see him.

Despite that fact, Rion still decided to ask.

"It's a merchant from the capital, my lord. He seems to be thinking of opening a business here."

“Is that so. I guess there still are enterprising people in the word. Alright, I’ll meet him. Lead him here right away.”

“At once, milord!”

Receiving Rion’s orders, the soldier returned to convey his will to the visitor.

“It seems I have a guest, you may all leave.”

“As you wish milord.”

Everyone in the office left as they were told. Except for Cassius.

“...Didn’t I tell you to go?”

“It is my duty to escort the lord.”

“The visitor is just a merchant. There’s no need to worry.”

“So he says. We do not know that.”

“...I do not need an escort.”

“There are many people stronger than you, lord. Me included.”

“Kuh...”

For a purely military man, Cassius chose a good spot to pick on. The combat strength was the only thing Rion acknowledged in him and his group. And with that being the case, he couldn’t forcefully contradict the man on that subject.

Without saying anything further, Rion turned his eyes back to the documents on the desk. This was a tacit assent for Cassius to remain in the room.

After a while, the soldier from earlier came back bringing a stranger with him. Rion, seeing that, stood up from behind his desk and moved to the side of the sofa in front of it.

“Please have a seat.”

“C-Certainly.”

Encouraged by Rion, the man took a seat. Rion then sat in front of him.

“Welcome to my fief. Did you have any difficulties during your journey?”

“Journey?”

“...On your way here...”

“Ah! No everything was fine. And I have seen so many interesting things too.”

“Did you now, that’s good. Now then, I heard you were planning on conducting some business here?”

“Boss? What’s with that? Is that way of speaking popular here or something?”

“Don’t call me boss you halfwit! We’re not alone!”

“A-Ah.... How do you do, errr... Not boss... How should I call you, boss?”

Finally noticing the presence of Cassius, the man attempted to act out his role but he was not very good at it, to describe things charitably. Well, that was not really surprising. There’s no way a scoundrel from the slums would be able to conduct himself like a proper merchant.

“...Drop it, it’s too late already.”

“I’m sorry, boss.”

And so Rion had given up on the charade.

“So someone finally showed up. However, to be blunt, I didn’t expect it would be you, Folz.”

In the ranks of Rion’s subordinates, Folz was nowhere near the top. Even if that was not the case, he was not very good at jobs demanding false appearances as shown by his inability to play a proper merchant.

“Well, stuff happened. There were no problems with me leaving, so I got picked.”

“Stuff?”

“First big bro Gordon said he would go. That would be bad, so others stopped him.”

“Well, duh, he and Ain are needed in the capital to keep the organization going.”

Those two had discovered the good sides of not standing at the top of an organization but serving under someone like Rion instead. Rion, despite being the reason for that, had still not grasped the fact.

“Yeah, that’s right. Big bro Ain was easily made to understand but Gordon was a sneaky bastard. He unexpectedly said that he was lower in the ranks of the brotherhood and as the underling, he would go instead.”

“...Him, an underling? He was a boss formerly and he is older too.”

“Yeah. So people were looking for an excuse to stop him and ended up sending me instead since I’m neither a grunt nor a big fish.”

“I see. I think I understand.”

Folz was chosen as someone completely unlike his two key subordinates in order to convince them to stay.

“So that’s that boss, things are gonna be rough for a bit, so do treat me well.”

“Yeah. How long are you going to be here?”

“Me?”

“Huh? Aren’t you going back to the capital eventually? There’s something I want sent there.”

“Ah, other guys will do that. My job here is to set up a brothel.”

“Here, in this town?”

This wasn’t a part of Rion’s plan.

“Yes. It’s strange not to have a base on the boss’ land so we decided to build a brothel.”

“...Won't it lose money?..”

There was no one in this place that would go to a brothel. Not only was the population low, it was also desperately poor.

“Thought so too seeing the town. But there are reasons.”

“Reasons?”

“The whach-ya-call-it? Not a contact point but... Relay station? Yeah, it'll be that thing.”

“So not just a contact point but a relay station, huh?”

The plan Rion left to the organization assumed establishing a base in every single town on the highway from the capital to Camargue. This town was supposed to be a terminus of the network. Rion was suddenly having to evaluate the significance of having a base functioning as a relay station in this place instead.

It looked like his subordinates had cooked up something greater than he envisioned. That fact made him a little happy.

“Yeah. That's why, boss, profit doesn't matter...”

“Okay. Is the permit for a brothel really enough?”

“Ah, that's right. We wanted to make it the same as in the capital eventually.

“So a brothel, a public bath, a bar and a gambling house. Okay. With this permit, you are allowed to do all of that.”

“Boss?”

“I am the lord of this land. Gambling houses need a permit too.”

“...Ah, right.”

With this, Rion's criminal enterprise made the first, if for the moment token, attempt to legalize its operations. He couldn't possibly know that this would be the first huge step towards resurrecting the economy of Camargue.

“Okay, now I need you to do something for me.”

“Yes, boss?”

“I have several things I want to send back to the capital. This is the most important one.”

Rion pointed at a batch of documents, the financial records he gathered.

“What is that, boss?”

“Don’t worry your little mind about the contents. Tell Ain this needs to reach Charlotte Lanchester and that he is to handle it.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

“Tell him to keep the other part for the time being in case she refuses to act on what she’s given. Details and the contingency plan are written down too.”

“Understood.”

They would act as Rion instructed. That was just how Rion’s subordinates were in general. However, as opposed to Cassius’ group, the dwellers of the slums were actually capable of executing his instructions.

The main reason for that, though, was the confidence they gained from witnessing the improvements in the slum resulting from their efforts. Regardless, that difference in capability made Rion only keep Ain and the gang in his thoughts, which was very unfortunate for Cassius’ group.

Anyhow, the reformation of governance that couldn’t happen before was finally under way. Now that Rion decided on what to do, it was the time to act.



A month had passed since Folz had visited Rion. As Rion expected, something began to stir within the capital.

“Sir, a new criminal intelligence was handed in.”

At Royal Guard Investigation Bureau one of the investigators presented a fresh report to the bureau head.

“...This is... An irregularity within a crown vassal’s domain? Outside our jurisdiction.”

The bureau head rejected the content after a brief examination. He gave his subordinate a look of reproach for accepting something they shouldn’t deal with.

However, the man already knew that this was not within their authority and he felt he had a valid reason for escalating it.

“This comes from Charlotte Lanchester of House Fatillas.”

“The jurisdiction doesn’t change even if a daughter of a marquess house is the source.”

“The territory in question belongs to Baron Frey, sir. Baron Rion Frey.”

“...What?”

Just by hearing the name the bureau head’s complexion changed.

“...The one married to Ariel? That Ariel?”

“Yes, sir. Baron Rion Frey and his wife Ariel. Formerly Rion the Valet and Ariel Woodville Windhill.”

“So it is them.”

“How shall we proceed, sir?”

“Launch an investigation post-haste. Any tangible results are to be handed over to the Department of Internal Affairs without delay.”

“Yes, sir!”

The head of the bureau and his subordinates were said to be heartless but they were still humans. They believed it was their most important duty to show a strict front to the criminals.

For the bureau, the case of Vincent and Ariel was a huge fiasco. It wasn’t because the

charges were false, that had never stopped them before as long as the case was for the good of the kingdom. But this one was not.

Even now Minstrels sang about the tragic fate of Vincent and Ariel. All those tales cast the bureau in a completely different light than usual making it seem wicked, cruel and inhuman. And as those ballads had spread, so had the antipathy to the royals they incited.

The Crown was, of course, trying to clamp down on this, which predictably, caused the songs to spread even wider. The tug of war between the government's attempts at suppression and Rion's subordinates that were fanning the flames resulted in an explosive growth of the discontent.

Seeing the situation was helpless, the top echelons of the kingdom directed their irritation at the Investigation Bureau. Mainly because focusing it on Arnold's group was unthinkable.

The bureau, not entirely blameless in this, craved for a chance to redeem themselves.

And now, Rion, aware of all this, was using this knowledge. He was using them even though they were his enemies, or rather, he was using them exactly because they were his enemies. Because that was just how he operated.

The bureau investigated every present and recent official assigned to Bandeaux in one swoop, regardless whether they were retired, dead or in hiding. If the whole affair had been reported to the Department of Internal Affairs from the start, as the jurisdiction dictated, the guilty parties would be able to whitewash the whole thing. But because it was the Royal Guard's Investigation Bureau that was leading the case, the corrupt officials could do nothing. With their misdeeds coming to light one after another a huge number of people was arrested.

The greatest embezzlement case in the history of the kingdom – that was how the senior government figures started to call it.

# Chapter 39

## The New Feudal Lord That Is The Seed Of All Worries

Cassius and his peers were trying to figure out their fief lord, Rion. They knew well that he didn't harbor pleasant feelings towards them. But despite that, no matter how severely they treated him, he still wouldn't stop the daily training routine.

Harsh punishment was handed out to the fief population that turned to banditry. At least that was the former castellan's initial impression but the outcome of that proved to be different. The captured outlaws looked to be grateful for their new livelihood, that was free of worry about the next meal, and were treating the forced labor as if it actually wasn't a punishment.

The other bandits, who came to know of this situation, started to surrender one after another. The public order in the territory improved almost overnight.

Furthermore, thanks to the labor of the former bandits, the fief had become livelier. The highway was now in a good state of repair, the reclamation of the fallow land was proceeding nicely and some of it was about to be reborn anew as proper fields.

But even then, the clan heads were pessimistic, since a lot of time would pass until the first harvest and the financial situation of the barony didn't change. The territory was on the verge of going bankrupt. And then, suddenly, a large amount of money was transferred from the capital.

The funds embezzled from the treasury of Bandeaux by the former officials were unexpectedly returned. While much of that ill-gotten coin had already been spent, the total amount was still an accumulation of years of fraud. Even the part of it that was recovered made for a huge sum. Enough to cover the running cost of the barony for years to come, even assuming no tax income.

The clan heads could not know that once the Investigation Bureau found proof of an official's corruption, then even if the person himself was already dead, the embezzled money would be reclaimed from the assets of their children, grandchildren or even

the great grandchildren. It was so determined to use this chance for redemption that it would even aggressively go after other relatives if nothing could be claimed from close family.

Thus, the financial problems of Bandeaux were solved. And that was something that Rion did on his own. His personality might have been extremely problematic but the clan heads couldn't help but acknowledge his ability as the fief lord.

And the changes didn't end here. For Rion, all that happened until now was merely a stopgap measure and the proper reformation of the barony started now.

"Making the captured bandits do forced labor... Not bad, Rion. In the capital tasks like working in the mines are left to criminals as well after all."

"From your tone... You're not entirely happy with this?"

"More thought into how you use them wouldn't go amiss. If you're going to have them work, let them work more efficiently."

"More efficiently? Do you mean their working hours, environment, or something else like that?"

"My problem is mostly with where you make them work."

"...There are no mines in this barony."

After all, Rion also wanted them to work in a mine. Punishment as an idea required having people do work they disliked. If the labor forced on the criminals did not fit the criteria, they would not change.

"I'm not talking about that. Having them cultivate land is fine but there are better places for them to be doing that. The areas they are reclaiming now may have been farmland in the past but that doesn't necessarily make them worth the effort."

"I see. I haven't thought of that."

"It's better to look for a place ideal for farming. The presence of a water source is a good indicator. Some of the fields you are reclaiming used to be farmed, but lie far from irrigation. Abundance of good soil also matters but you'd probably need some professionals to judge that."

“Alright. I’ll arrange things immediately.”

Just like that, a new policy was enacted. The barony might have obtained funds but they were nothing without people to utilize them properly.

People like the person Rion was speaking to now, an acquaintance from the Royal Academy. His name was John, he was one of the commoner students who were formerly ad-hoc tutors of the late Vincent. He had since graduated and now came all the way to Bandeaux in order to apply for the job that Rion advertised throughout the bars and restaurants of the kingdom with recruitment posters. A method unknown in this world Rion used as he had nothing to lose.

John wasn’t alone, other people from the school days came too. And it wasn’t as though all of them were having trouble finding jobs. They did so simply to be of help to Ariel for the sake of her late brother.

That made them less like Rion’s subordinates and more like his guests.

“Time for my report now.”

This time it was Octo wishing to present his report. He too was one of the former tutors of Vincent.

“The topic?”

“Trade situation.”

“Trade? We are yet to produce any goods, though?”

“That’s true but let me elaborate nevertheless.”

“Alright.”

“I’ll start by explaining what I learned about this area back in the capital when I tried to research the topic.”

“Go on.”

“There are few reasons as to why the trade never flourished here even though this fief has made contact with other countries. The first and foremost problem is that the

countries approached barely have anything worthwhile to sell.”

“Both the Ox Kingdom and the Hush Kingdom?”

Bandeaux shared a border with two other countries. Both of them were so small and poor that even higher ranked nobles of the Gran Flamm Kingdom had more individual wealth.

“Yeah. Both of them are so poor they were not worth invading. Which is why they are still existing.”

What Octo said just now was not entirely accurate. The reason why Gran Flamm kingdom didn’t invade the two was not their lack of wealth but the high price of the war against Bandeaux.

The only actual payoff from that conquest was some poor land. The Six Clans, that could have been a valuable new asset, were so diminished by the fighting that they ended up amounting to nothing.

Any war against those two kingdoms could be expected to yield similar results and, instead of making it stronger, would just weaken the country more. Due to that, the government officials decided to apply diplomatic pressure in lieu of more war. That proved to be a success and those two realms, while still technically independent, were now no different from vassal states.

Thanks to this, while the barony might have been a national border, it was under no risk of being attacked anytime soon. That sense of security was one of the factors that prompted the officials sent here to do fraud.

“What merit would there be in trade then, if the neighbors are that poor?”

“I haven’t finished my presentation yet. There are other reasons why the trade never took off over here. Some distance to the south there is a major trade route the fief never tried to tap. It leads to the Merica Kingdom, a very wealthy and industrious country. “

Merica was not a state that should be compared to the neighbors of Bandeaux but rather to the Gran Flamm Kingdom itself. It could be reasonably said to be the greatest obstacle on the Gran Flamm’s quest for dominance.

“All the goods flow along that route, huh? If we did something unexpected some of the trade from that direction could end up going here instead.”

There was no way for them to fight a full-on trade war. Being weaker, the only thing that Rion’s territory could do was to collect any trade spilling from that route.

“Oh, you understood really fast.”

“Well, there was this strange merchant the other day. His consortium wanted to do business here so it made me curious about the subject.”

“Are you sure that business was not a shady one?”

“A permit was issued, it’s a perfectly legal enterprise.”

“...Will it even be able to pay tax?”

Octo was actually more worried about the fact that Rion gave a license to a suspicious merchant. That was because neither of them was aware of Rion’s connection to the underworld and Rion had no plans to tell them in the future either.

“Of course, they are honest merchants.”

“Is that so... Let’s put that topic aside for now. Coming back to trade, there are yet more problems in that area.”

“There are still more?”

“In a sense, this is the biggest obstacle of the lot.”

“And that is?”

“The risk of travel. The barony of Bandeaux is surrounded by mountains. There are mountains on the border and the highway goes through some of the ranges as well. “

“I believe the bandit threat subsided significantly.”

“There are many demonic beasts still roaming there. According to the research I’ve done in the capital, the mountainous region of this land is apparently infested by monsters. The subjugation should be a duty of the territorial army.”

“...Which is apparently not fulfilled properly. I expect to hear that they did not think it was a good time for that or some other similar excuse.”

As always, Rion was really strict on Cassius and his group.

“So the plan would go like this. We secure the highway. We make carrying goods over it an enticing prospect and spread that information among the merchants. That, in turn, demands cooperation with our neighbors and lowering of tariffs. Doing this will solve the problems with trade. “

“In that case, the subjugation of the demonic beasts comes first. And I have someone who specializes on that in mind.”

“The territorial army?”

“Exactly. As for the plan of the operation and budgeting...”

“Leave that to us, my lord.”

Said the clan heads who until now were just listening in silence. They were driven by the feeling of not wanting to end up as chess pieces without agency, which was how the things had been developing until now.

“Can you do it?”

“It’s a military matter, we’re confident.”

“I see. I’ll leave it to you then. Do not tarry with the preparations, however, make sure not to rush when executing the plan.”

“Do not rush, lord?”

“The complete annihilation of the demonic beasts is a project for several decades. What we need now is a plan that would decrease their numbers enough so they stop attacking travelers. One that doesn’t lead to high casualty rate among the troops. Demonic beast population can recover easily, rebuilding the manpower pool is hard.”

“...Yes, lord baron.”

These kinds of statements coming from Rion threw Cassius and the others into

confusion each time. They just couldn't tell whether he was warm- or cold-hearted. The correct answer, in this case, would be cold-hearted, of course. The reason why he was so mindful of the soldier's lives was simply that he needed the army. But he didn't trust them enough yet to start being kind towards them.

"I think it would be good to design a chain of military outposts along the highway. It would be good if the travelers always had somewhere to escape when under attack by demonic beasts and it might even give an impression we are seriously looking after their wellbeing."

Rion's attention already returned to Octo.

"Rion, don't surprise us so much."

"Eh?"

"Well, the plans that you suggest may be simple but they are effective. I do not mean to look down on your origins but it's quite strange how you are able to come up with those ideas despite coming from the slum."

"I'm only trying to put myself in the consumer's shoes."

"Consumer's shoes... I see. I'll be using this as a reference."

This concept of putting oneself in the service user's shoes did not exist in this world. Bars only tended to offer food and beverage, while most other shops offered terrible service. Even the prostitutes only considered selling their own bodies. No one had thought of incorporating extra services into their establishments.

That was exactly why his businesses in the capital city slum managed to gather customers even though they were in an area people hardly dared to approach.

"Also, while we secure the highway, we need to start publicity efforts. Well, little by little at first."

Of course, it didn't need saying that Rion intended to start on that immediately. If he didn't work on laying the groundwork now it would only result in wasted time later.

As for why he didn't go into detail, that was because the group that would be tasked with that was illegal. He would make it happen as fast as possible, and besides, he

planned to extend his reach to the neighboring countries anyway. This was the perfect excuse.

“Ah, you’re right. Now, coming back to cultivation efforts...”

“Eh? Wasn’t that John’s brief?”

“It was.”

“...Okay, so what about that?”

John, thinking the issues under his care mostly resolved, could only offer a puzzled look as he asked.

“It seems that there are small fortifications spread all over the fief. Try to survey those locations for farming potential.”

“Cultivating crops near the fortifications?”

“Fortified positions are almost guaranteed to have a supply of water. We can use that for irrigation.”

“You’re right. However, won’t those places be inconvenient to live in?”

“They are forced to work as a punishment for their crimes. It’s actually better if the housing arrangements are inconvenient. The comfortable environment should only be a privilege of the honest farmers.”

“...Mhm. That’s true.”

John was satisfied with Rion’s answer. However, some of the people present still had reservations.

“Erm, milord?”

Predictably, Cassius spoke up as their representative.

“What is it?”

“Are we going to release captured bandits back into the strongholds?”

The dissent was reasonable and it was normal to think that way.

“Only if the land around them is good for farming.”

“But having them holed up in a fortress again will...”

“Just destroy some of the defenses then. And besides, do you think they would want their food provision halted again?”

“...Ah.”

There was no way the prisoners would throw away their current livelihood devoid of food problems. After all most of them didn't choose banditry because they really wanted to, they did it to avoid starvation.

“Well then, there's no more problems, right? “

“Yes...”

Being unable to refute the arguments, Cassius was no longer able to raise objections.

“As we have decided earlier, we need to find someone to survey the quality of the soil. Start on that as soon as possible. Now that I think of it, we need someone to inspect the water sources too. Make finding those people a priority.”

“Alright, I'm next then.”

Yet another alumnus of the Royal Academy was about to start his report. Although they had no practical experience, all of them had graduated with recognition for excellence.

The territory government that had ground to a halt had now begun to operate again and achieve progress.

The only people being left behind were the ones born and raised in the territory, who wanted to do something for their land the most, Cassius and all the clans of Bandeaux.



After the working day had ended, the clan heads gathered in a certain bar in town.

This was not something like a drinking party to vent their frustrations from work. Although they were indeed sipping alcohol, they were doing it in silence just lazily indulging in their own thoughts.

After some time like this...

“...What do you think?”

Cassius asked no one in particular.

“I admit that he’s good. He doesn’t have any experience but he was able to achieve this much. If this territory were to show actual growth as a result of his efforts he would really be a lord worth serving.”

Kiel of Clan Blue answered that question. The subject of their discussion was clearly Rion and they seemed to rate him highly.

“Just because his ability is excellent doesn’t make him a good ruler. There are plenty of talented lords in history who we now call foolish or evil.”

Apollo of Clan Yellow voiced criticism Kiel’s assessment.

“Are you thinking of his personality? How should we even start with that? He may be ruthless but that’s a necessary attribute for someone that stands above his peers. Besides, that heartlessness saved people that have fallen so low that they took up banditry.”

Mo-Heitor of Clan Green disagreed with Apollo in turn.

“I know that.”

Apollo assented to Mo-Heitor’s statement. Not only had Rion given food to the former bandits, he was yet to sentence any of them to death.

“In that case, what are you anxious about?”

“I can’t figure out his true nature.”

“Well... Yes.”

“We already know that he comes from the capital city slums and that he leads the criminals there. The Crown should know that too, so why was he made a noble and given Bandeaux as a fief?”

“That is the question.”

“Sure, his magic is strong. It’s not strange to see him being made a noble. However, a baron from the start? With his own territory? I have never heard of such a thing.”

Because Rion’s first impression of them was horrible, he had not told the locals a single thing about himself. Not that he would want to talk about the matter regarding Vincent anyway. And even his connections to the slums were not something he would normally wish other people knew.

Furthermore, it was not as though talking about his story would clear the clan heads’ doubts. After all, Rion still didn’t know that he was the missing son of the king and the queen.

“In the end, that is what it comes to. We know too little about our lord. Even his wife doesn’t seem to be normal. Her magic and the farewell gift from her mother are way beyond the ordinary.”

All of them had shared Cassius’ thoughts. They knew too little about Rion. That being the case, they would normally remain quiet and keep outwardly appearing loyal. Even if Rion became aware of that, he would probably still say nothing.

Yet here they were, gathering to share their worries.

The reason why they considered serving him honestly despite knowing little about his true nature was because they felt something in him.

“Have Weiss and Schwarz returned yet?”

Kiel asked Cassius.

“They sent a person back early. The scope of the investigation proved much larger than

expected, they will most likely be delayed.”

“So there are that many secrets behind him...”

“Seems to be the case. In the meantime we can only wait until those two return. However...”

The events began to progress with unexpected momentum. From the looks of it, they might soon find themselves completely abandoned by Rion. This sudden urgency prompted them to meet in such a fashion.

“There’s still a chance to learn a bit more about him.”

Everyone shared the same thoughts as Mo-Heitor.

“Did anyone hear anything during training?”

The fact that Apollo asked meant he hadn’t personally. Neither had the others. With the sole exception of Cassius who had something that came to mind.

“I do not know how significant that may be, but...”

“What did you learn?”

“It seems he is aiming to defeat the knight commander.”

“What!?”

This pronouncement of Cassius surprised not only Apollo but all of those present. They all found this a truly interesting statement.

“From how he spoke, it looked like he had fought him before.”

“...Hostility towards the Crown? No, that cannot be the case. He wouldn’t have been given the territory if that was true.”

“Agreed. That’s why I was thinking he may be close to the knight commander.”

“I see. A student wishing to defeat his mentor, or something similar, huh? That seems likely.”

“No. That’s implausible.”

“Why?”

“His swordsmanship is unlike anything taught in the kingdom. He may be copying the techniques but the foundation is a complete mess. I don’t know about the army or noble retinues but there’s no way you would end up with that kind of swordsmanship by learning under the knight commander.”

“You’re right. It is too unrefined. Actually leaving the knight commander himself aside, that is not something you end up with from being taught by an instructor.”

All of them had considerable martial prowess. The clans may have lost their war for independence in the past but the six heads still were the inheritors of the force that tormented the kingdom’s army during the conflict. From their perspective, Rion’s skill with a blade was no different than a child’s.

“He has talent, though. And his vision is way outside the norm. It’s not usual for a beginner to be able to meet my sword that much.”

“Same. With his extreme dynamic vision I had no choice but to fight him seriously.”

Those words of Apollo prompted nods from the whole party. This was the reason why Rion always ended up with all those bruises.

He might not be aware of it himself but his dynamic vision was excellent. Due to that, although he lacked skill, he could still avoid the opponent’s blade and could see through the openings.

Initially, all of them were holding themselves back but because their swords wouldn’t connect, they had to take him a little bit more seriously. And by the time that Rion could avoid their blades no longer, they were already rather serious. Being on the receiving end of all that meant ending up on the verge of fainting.

“Would the knight commander, or anyone else of importance, miss that kind of talent?”

“If they would, they wouldn’t be fit for their jobs.”

“There’s no way one would aim to defeat that kind of opponent, though, right? They can’t be friendly.”

“That being the case...”

Although there was still another possibility in their minds, not a single one of them had the confidence to put it into words. In the end, no matter how often they met, they were not able to arrive at a decision.

“As I thought, this matter should not be rushed. More information is necessary to make sure if he’s a leader worth following. Let’s wait until the other two return. After all, we, our predecessors and the common folk have already waited for so long. Waiting for just a little more won’t change anything.”

Cassius said that jokingly, but not one of them felt like laughing.

The six clans of Bandeaux had inherited a desire from the generation past. It was the yearning for the time when Bandeaux would be their own again.

Yet more waiting might sound like a good idea but not being able to find the right opportunity to rebel would make them another unfulfilled generation. But even so, the desire that has been passed down to them was too profound to be simply discarded. It had somehow made them all restless.

And then Rion appeared showcasing a surprising amount of talent, this had prompted them to dream that their chance may have indeed arrived.

Simply, they were thinking whether he was worth adopting as a leader of their insurrection.

And they couldn’t decide on that today either.

The Black and White clans. The leaders of those two had not introduced themselves to Rion yet. They were not in Camargue, or anywhere else in Bandeaux for that matter. They were investigating Rion’s background.

When they would come back, far from arriving at a conclusion, the clans would face even more worries. But that was something the present leaders were yet to know.

# Chapter 40

## Side Event: The Schemes Of The Devils

A troop of soldiers wearing non-standardized armor was moving along the highway. The repairs of the road in the regions not leading to the capital had not been finished yet and the soldiers were currently traveling through the mountainous area close to the national border. The road surface here was perfectly untouched by any sort of maintenance effort so the heavy squadrons of soldiers escorting cargo wagons found the journey really taxing.

“...Not a single one came out.”

Rion, displeased, muttered to himself. Even though they were in the middle of a demonic beast subjugation, not a single one had appeared so far. With their efforts up to now fruitless, they even tried heading close to the national border.

“Just as I thought, there’s too many of us. Didn’t I tell you this enough times already?”

Rion’s displeasure was aimed at his traveling companion, Kiel Blau. He was not venting this time. He had suggested before the start of the operation that it should be undertaken by multiple small units spread over an area but he had been ignored. They ended up traveling together in one group, him, a hundred of Bandeaux Clansmen and the head of Clan Blue.

Furthermore, the idea of having him participate in the subjugation proved controversial too. But Rion, having his personal development in mind, didn’t want to let go of the chance to get battle experience, even if it would be against the demonic beasts.

“We are about to arrive at the national border, lord. I suggest we pull back to avoid provoking the neighboring countries.”

Letting Rion’s complaints go by, Kiel has suggested pulling out.

“What awaits on the border?”

Rion asked the question without remarking on Kiel's attitude. He had not, after all, voiced his complaints expecting an apology. It was just grumbling.

"Nothing much lord, it's just a wooden post marking where the border lies."

"Are there no soldiers on guard?"

"Having some would just raise unnecessary questions in the capital."

"...I see."

Thus, Rion's plan of either contacting those countries directly or investigating their side of the border came to nothing. This was the other reason why he insisted on participating in the subjugation and sending out small teams.

All this reminded him once again just how troublesome being a feudal lord had been.

"I will halt the soldiers, lord."

What Rion did not know was that Kiel organized such a big squad exactly in order to prevent him from acting independently. The expedition unfolded exactly as he and the other clan heads wished.

While the orders to cease marching were issued.

"...Assume defensive stance."

"Lord, if we are going to take a break, wouldn't withdrawing a bit first be better?"

"Defensive formation, just do it. Make it face... Right."

"Right?"

Setting down in a defensive formation facing a certain direction was not something a commander would do when ordering a break. Furthermore, there was a steep mountain slope on the right side of the road. Kiel just couldn't make sense of Rion's orders.

"Hurry up! There's no time!"

“My lord?!”

“Face the left side diagonally towards your right! Defensive stance! Or whatever damn thing you want! Just prepare for an enemy attack.”

Because Kiel wouldn’t act, Rion had begun to personally issue orders to the army. But as he had no experience in commanding soldiers, his instructions were chaotic.

“Enemy assault!?”

“It won’t be the demonic beasts! Don’t let your guard down! Move people!”

Rion completely disregarded Kiel’s surprise. He continued to order his troops and exhort them into action as he headed in front of the slowly assembling formation while glaring at the slope of the mountain.

“...Lord? Just what is...?”

“Whatever comes, do not be surprised! Attack and kill anything that emerges.”

“Lord?! Are we under attack!?”

Rion’s way of speaking made it clear it would not be demonic beasts. Kiel was even more confused.

“I don’t know what comes. All I know is that it’s inhuman.”

“Wha-?”

There was no way that Kiel would be able to understand the meaning behind Rion’s words. The people of this era regarded the Devil and the other demons as something out of a fairytale.

Rion was aware of that. Hence he opted to not explain anything and focused on the coming battle.

“Sarah, Diane. We’re doing F2. Assaulting Formation.”

Responding to Rion’s call, Sarah and Diane took a form visible to others. As usual, they resembled flame dragons and water valkyries.

“.....Go!”

Answering Rion’s call, Sarah and Diane advanced. Weaving between trees, the pair of spirits split further increasing the number of manifestations. Kiel and the Bandeaux army could only watch them go in amazement.

After some time, multiple flashes of light could be seen within the forest.

“They’re coming! Get ready to intercept!”

Roughly at the same time as Rion yelled this order, the silhouettes of the enemy started to become visible among the trees. They were short, humanoid figures equipped with weapons and armor but not moving like trained soldiers would.

But the most striking feature were their faces resembling that of a boar or an ugly pig. Judging by Ryou’s memories, those beings should be called goblins.

“Wha–What on earth are they!?”

Uneasiness crept into the ranks of the soldiers that saw a demon for the first time ever.

On the other hand, once Rion was able to recognize those creatures, he felt relieved since going by Ryou’s memories, goblins were among the weakest of demons. But that feeling was short-lived. He soon saw that the assailants were not limited to goblins, he was able to recognize other types of demons too.

On top of that, the magical power that resonated with Sarah and Diane was not something that a mere goblin would be able to emit.

“Calm down! If you fight as usual, you can deal with them!”

But even so, something had to be done about the goblins that appeared first. For that sake, he had to calm down the army still shaken by the unknown creatures before them.

Rion stepped out of the line moving in front of the troops. The goblins immediately began attacking the lone figure that advanced on them but he was cutting them down one after another with his sword.

“They’re enemies that fall easily even to my blade! Do not fear! Attack!”

The first person to regain his composure was, as one would expect, the leader of the Blue clan, Kiel. He immediately rushed to Rion's side and began hacking at the goblins too.

And once Kiel advanced, others did too. The army began to join the battle with the goblins en masse.

"Men, I need to fall back for now! They may be weak but stay vigilant! Do not chase far! They are not the only foes here!"

After shouting out his orders, Rion pulled out from the front line. Kiel followed too, as he immediately figured out that his army could handle the goblins without him.

"Lord, what are they?"

"No time for detailed explanations. They are the minions of the Devil, things you know as demons. I do not know why are they here or whether someone is controlling them."

"The Devil?"

"Straight out of a fairytale world."

Rion laughed unintentionally while saying so. After all, for him, this world was already a fairytale.

"...The demons are real."

"Were you not aware these things existed?"

"No lord, it is my first time hearing about them or seeing them in person."

"And here they are. It's the same with the Devil. No one had seen him yet but he is real."

"Yes, lord."

Kiel wasn't able to deny what he was told. And besides, he had already accepted the possibility in his head. Even if his heart refused to do so.

"There are many races of demons. That one is one of the weakest. But there are other, both weak and strong. That's why the army should not let their guard down."

“...Understood.”

“I will go search for them now. The command is yours, you are better at it than me anyway, are you not?”

“Lord! Please leave it to me!”

Glad about being entrusted with a task by Rion for the first time Kiel returned to the front lines in high spirits. Rion, left to his own devices, returned to focusing his consciousness on searching his surroundings.

He might have pretended to be calm in front of Kiel but his innermost thoughts were in considerable turmoil.

His first problem was that he did not know what to do if the Devil really was here right now. The Devil was an existence meant to be defeated by the protagonist, Maria, and her comrades, not a character supposed to be defeated here.

In the past, Rion had fought recklessly against the World but now he knew that he couldn't really defy Its will. Or prevent important events from occurring.

The event ending up with the Devil's defeat would happen at the game's conclusion. Which meant it would be impossible to defeat him until that time. That being the case, if he were to appear in this place then the only choice before them would be to run away. And there was no guarantee they could safely get away either. It could be safely said that the situation had him cornered.

But even if he did not appear, this was still a troublesome situation for him. Frankly, for Rion, this whole devil business was other people's problem. He was planning many things for the time after Maria and the others defeat the enemy but with this development, even those plans would crumble. Even if not directly, it was possible that he just got himself caught in that conflict.

This last suspicion was just him misunderstanding the situation. But he couldn't possibly know that. Nor could he expect what was about to happen.

(.....Is this it?)

Something got caught in Sarah and Diane's detection net. However, that thing was noticeably weaker compared to the magic he felt before.

Even so, Rion decided to rejoin the fight. After all, he found no other beings that would emit a stronger magical power yet.

What entered Rion's vision once he rejoined the battle was a being very different from the goblins that surrounded it. For one, the size was much larger. It had, by far, exceeded Rion's stature with a large build nearly three meters tall. The girth was also immense, even if three Rion were to line up, it wouldn't be enough to match it.

But the thing that described its character more than anything was its eye. A single big eye occupying the middle of its face.

"No matter how you look at it, it's a cyclops, huh? Well, saves me from the trouble of thinking what to name it."

It seemed that all the demonic beasts appearing in this world were within the scope of Ryou's knowledge rather than Rion's. He immediately accepted it as a natural thing, since this world was a game after all.

Although Rion didn't feel as tense about the fight as he did at the beginning, this was definitely not the case for his soldiers. They were momentarily shaken by the huge new type of demon appearing in front of them. However, they managed to regain composure immediately.

"Besides, it has an obvious weak point. "Knowledge will come to your aid" is a really apt saying."

Suddenly, numerous icy spears appeared mid-air. All of them started assaulting the cyclops at once. It tried to deflect the projectiles with the ax it was holding but due to staggered timing of the attack, it couldn't get them all. Besides, most of the missiles were just decoys.

The real attack was aimed at the cyclops' eye. While it was focusing on the feints targeting its legs, one of the spears that had gotten closer changed its trajectory and hit the cyclops in the eye.

"Guaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The demon, having suffered a deep wound to its eye, yelled in pain and had started to rampage. However, no matter how much it raged, there was nothing much it could do after losing its vision. The flailing of its arms and swings of its ax hit nothing but air.

Seeing this, Rion intensified his magic assault. Sarah engulfed his head in flames while Diane started slicing his arms into pieces.

But it was Rion's sword that finished the duel. The ice flying in the air started turning into blocks and stepping on those he headed towards the immobile cyclops and swung his sword sideways across its neck.

The head of the cyclops flew into the air as its body slowly hit the ground with a thump. By the time the vibration of the earth ceased, perfect silence descended onto the field of battle...

"...Reform ranks. There seem to be no more enemies in the area but for the time being avoid letting your guard down."

...Until Rion's orders broke it.



"A failure, eh?"

At a considerably distant location, deep within a cave unknown to the people of the kingdom, a being that couldn't be called a human muttered in annoyance.

"I have advised you to stop. It was a futile attempt."

Another devil spoke to the first smiling with ridicule.

"But haven't you agreed to this later on anyway?"

"I approved of the assault. However, I told you that if you were going to do it, you should be thorough."

"We don't have the luxury of preparing such an attack."

"I know. That's why I stopped you at first. It's an opponent who defeated Danann the Lich in a contest of magic. A demon like a cyclops couldn't possibly succeed."

It was exactly as the second devil said. Simply relying on a swarm of goblins and a cyclops unable to even use magic couldn't possibly be enough to defeat Rion. If the first devil was adamant on relying on cyclopes, he would need one or two hundred of

them.

But currently, the devils didn't have that kind of manpower. They were merely on the stage of preparing for the promised day.

"...Fine. I'll acknowledge my failure. However, with this, we have confirmed that his guy is a key individual."

"We have confirmed that a long time ago. That's why I said that we should not lay a hand on him for now."

"Why? He's someone that will hinder our plans in the future, we should just get rid of him now."

"That's just pointlessly throwing away our pawns. We should instead focus on gathering our strength, for the time being, so we can release the seal on Lord Daimon as soon as possible."

It was true that Maria was the one to defeat The Devil. But there was something Rion was misunderstanding about that situation. There was not just one Devil, the beings gathering in this place could be called devils as well.

Their objective was the resurrection of their god, Daimon the Devil and Maria's party was going to obstruct that, by defeating them.

"However..."

"Baron, you bastard, do you think the Lord Daimon would be defeated by the likes of these humans?"

"That's impossible."

"That's exactly why there's no need for us to be impatient. The time for bloodbath will come after Lord Daimon awakens. There is no need for us to cause trouble before then. When our lord revives, our strength will also rise. We can deal with Danann's enemy at that time."

The Devil, Daimon, would grant strength to the lesser devils who worshiped him. And with that strength, they would conquer the world. This was their ambition.

“...You’re right. Fine. Let us put the matter of that brat, Rion, to the side for now. Shall we now sacrifice the weaklings as an offering for Lord Daimon’s return ?”

“By all means.”

“Alright Kanan. Let’s get to it immediately. I will tell Goran myself.”

“I’ll leave that to you.”

In order to unseal Daimon the Devil, they needed to soak the ground with sacrificial blood. That was the reason why they started to cause numerous disturbances.

The devils have now, at last, begun to hasten their plans.



After he had defeated the Danann the Lich, lesser devils brushed Maria’s existence aside and they were now recognizing Rion as a key individual instead.

Of course, not knowing that, Rion just blamed Maria for dragging him into her matters trying to deal with this new conflict full of resentment for having to do so.

“How is it?”

“We have examined the surroundings but as expected...”

Kiel answered to Rion’s question while slightly shaking his head.

“There are no tracks, huh?”

“None at all.”

It was not as though the matter could be concluded by simply defeating the cyclops. Knowing where those demons had come from was imperative. Regardless of whether it was a nest or something like a village if such a place were to be found in the forest, it had to be crushed to remove the demon threat. If not just demonic beasts but also actual demons were to infest their new trade route, no one would dare to use it.

With this in mind, they retraced the tracks the attackers left on the ground. Unfortunately, before long and not that deep into the trees, the footsteps vanished.

Finding it unbelievable, the scouts investigated the area thoroughly but, as Kiel reported, found nothing.

“With so many of them it’s impossible for there to be no trail.”

“It is indeed unthinkable.”

“Right. That being the case, those demons must have appeared suddenly.”

“Is that even possible?”

“There’s only one explanation I can think of.”

While he ordered the army to look for the footsteps, Rion was also considering a certain possibility.

“Lord?”

“They were transported by magic. A spell sent them here from another place.”

“...There’s magic like that?”

“I don’t know. But I won’t go as far as saying it doesn’t exist. Look at the ground here.”

“Eh?”

Kiel stared at his own feet as Rion requested. At first glance, he couldn’t see anything wrong but he was sure he was missing something.

“...A line? No... A shape?”

Looking carefully at the ground, the grass looked burnt in places. That damage spread over a considerable area and betrayed regularity as though it was arranged.

“Do you know of magic circles?”

Rion turned to ask the clan head.

“No, lord...”

This wasn't exactly ignorance. Magic was something that belonged to those with high social status only. Therefore, the spread of knowledge about it was manipulated and restricted.

"I don't know much either. That's why I have suspicions, not evidence. However, it's certain that I have felt strong magic being used here."

Rion came to a conclusion that the magic he had felt before must have been a teleportation spell. There were also traces here of something comparable to a magic circle.

"...If lord's suspicions are correct then that's not good."

"Because we won't be able to figure out where they are going to appear next time."

"Exactly..."

If the demons suddenly appeared in the middle of Camargue, it would cause a huge chaos. Any such a prolonged threat would halt the revival of the Bandeaux half way in.

"But while I won't deny that possibility I don't think that's going to happen."

"Why is that, lord?"

"They need to create a magic circle before they can transport, right? If that's the case, we just have to be on the lookout for those."

"...Indeed."

If the demons could just appear anywhere they liked, there was no need to specifically attack his soldiers in such a place. Rion concluded that they must have learned that the army was going to travel along this route and they had prepared an ambush this close to the border. He had no evidence for this but he was, nevertheless, convinced he was right.

"Try taking drawings of the details burned into the ground and spread them to notice boards across the barony. Report immediately if something similar is found."

"Yes, lord."

“Notify envoys of the neighboring countries. Tell them about the appearance of the demons. Showing them a corpse will probably help, so try to arrange that too.”

“Understood. I will start on this at once.”

“And now, let’s return to Camargue post-haste. Our plans need revision. Vigilance of the demon threat needs to go in hand with monster subjugation. We will require patrols throughout the territory.”

“Certainly.”

The Bandeaux revival effort hit a stumbling block with the appearance of the demons. Rion found that frustrating but he also knew that frustration would solve nothing.

So for the time being, he would do what had to be done. As was his attitude from the very start, even before meeting Vincent.

# Chapter 41

## Overlapping Feelings, Different Actions

After returning to Camargue, Rion hurriedly began to work. They had to hasten up implementing the methods to deal with demons or everything would end for them soon. Rion, fully aware of that, begun pressing forward with all conceivable countermeasures for the problem and treated it as an emergency matter. But he didn't stop at just that.

Even with the threat of demons, he couldn't stop the measures aiming towards the revival of the territory. His subordinates and the guest alumni of the Royal Academy were once again reminded how demanding working under Rion was. Because they ended up running around the castle all the time it had, in a way, become lively.

With that kind of situation unfolding, the heads of Clan White, Rouge Weiss, and Clan Black, Bravd Schwarz, appeared in the castle. This incidentally made Rouge Weiss the first female subordinate Rion met in Camargue.

"The head housemaid?"

"Yes. The task of handling all the maids inside the castle is my duty."

"Aren't there none presently?"

There was not a single maid in the castle. All the girls bearing that title before were employed in name only while in fact they were just mistresses of the officials from the capital. They disappeared at the same time as their patrons did.

"I wanted to hire some, lord."

"We don't need them."

"Eh?"

"We don't need maids. Therefore, the head housemaid is also unnecessary."

After he declared that, Rion's gaze returned to the pile of papers on his desk. This was his way of declaring that he didn't want to talk about this matter any longer but just this wouldn't stop Rouge.

".....erm, I believe Baroness may need some."

"Ariel is currently practicing so that she can do everything on her own. She says she finds that interesting."

"But I believe it would be bad to have none at all."

"We don't have the budget. At this time, money is only flowing out of the treasury and I can't afford to spend it on unnecessary things."

"...But the maids will lose their jobs like this."

"Aren't there none?"

"Thinking about lord's arrival, I have searched for suitable candidates. Having to say to them that they aren't needed anymore..."

"...Isn't that your responsibility?"

"Yes. However, putting their feelings into consideration... And their families also have some expectations now..."

Rouge was looking downcast displaying a sorrowful face. She was trying persuasion by tears.

"...Alright. I'll ask Ariel."

Even knowing that those would be people who were brought by her, Rion couldn't just coldly turn them down. He had seen the dwellers of the slums shedding tears of joy as they have been hired. He had also seen the melancholy of those who were not chosen.

"Thank you very much."

Somehow, after being able to have her way, Rouge seemed content.

"Where were you and what have you been doing all this time?"

Suddenly, out of the blue, Rion pressed her for an answer unrelated to their former conversation.

“As I have mentioned already, I was searching for girls suitable to become maids.”

That was her answer but...

“Not you, I was asking the other one. I have heard what you were busying yourself with.”

“...My apologies, lord.”

From Rion’s way of speaking Rouge had a feeling that he was suspicious of her. She now didn’t think that Rion was asking about her from the start.

Indeed, Rion was not asking about Rouge.

“Ah, while I remember, I will consider the matter of new maids but head housemaid is not necessary for now. I may need one in the future but it won’t be you.”

“...Why is that, lord?”

“There’s a merchant named Folz in town. I believe his brothel would be a proper place of work for you.”

“What did you say!?”

Rouge expressed her anger about being suddenly told to become a prostitute but by doing this she was just letting her guard towards Rion down. After all, there was no way Rion would ever say something like this without having something in mind.

“That brothel is just a branch of a bigger one in the capital. You were contracted to that one, weren’t you? The documents are still there.”

“...How do you?”

Hearing Rion’s words made her face instantly turn blue. She never expected to hear those kinds of words from his mouth.

“It seems you have been making inquiries about someone. Furthermore, you have gone so far to even slip in as a prostitute. Are you a spy or something?”

“.....”

The nature of Rouge’s group was completely seen through by Rion. It was a blunder that someone working as an intelligence gathering operative should never make.

“If you are, that was a really childish method to adopt. You might have been, perhaps, underestimating the scoundrels of the slums a bit, don’t you think?”

Information security was one of the things that Rion’s syndicate was implementing seriously. They have thought of numerous ways to go about that and Rouge completely fell for those efforts. As Rion had said, she did not take them seriously enough.

“I don’t want those who snoop around my past at my side, so don’t ever show your face to me again. And it’s the same with the other guy. He had not shown himself directly in the capital but I heard there was a male spy too. Isn’t that you?”

“.....”

Bravd had no answer and Rion was not seeking one either. Whether Bravd admitted to it or not, Rion had no intention of backing out of his decision. Wanting them to understand that, Rion changed the subject.

“Cassius, I need horses.”

“...Horses, milord?”

“Yeah. They are for a messenger network linking the town, reclaimed farmland and military garrisons near the border so that they are able to cope with the appearance of demons faster among other things. Anyhow, I want to shorten the delay in information transfer as much as possible.”

Although having mounted messengers was a natural thing, Rion wanted to spread that system like a net across his territory. He was also planning on making an organization that would specialize in that task.

“...I believe that will be difficult, lord.”

“Don’t we have horses in the territory?”

“I won’t say there are none but the numbers are...”

“I see. Well then, we’ll have no choice but to buy from outside the barony. How many soldiers can ride a horse?”

“...Not that many, lord.”

“Isn’t mounted warfare the best way of fighting here?”

“It is, lord.”

“...I see. We have no choice in that case.”

Rion’s gaze moved from Cassius to John.

“I have split the prospective pasture land into two ranches. We were blessed in regards to the number of applicants so two of them can start at the same time. The whole thing depend on whether we will be able to procure horses, though.”

John smoothly presented the information about the plans for breeding of horses. It was an extension of the dairy cattle farming project that had already started earlier. This made clear now that Rion had never really counted on Cassius’ group in the first place.

“Get me a final estimate of the cost. I will think about the supplier on my own.”

“Lord, about that matter!”

“Hmm?”

It was Kiel of the Clan Blue that spoke up. It was rare for someone other Cassius to speak from that group unless there was just too much to do. So even the people around him were surprised by this action.

“I do not know whether I will be able to get a lot of them but I do have a source in mind.”

“...Is that so. Try your best in that case.”

“Yes, lord.”

“While you’re at it, find me soldiers that can ride a horse. Even the worst ones will do as long as they have the skill. I want to learn to fight while mounted as well.”

“Understood. I will find suitable people.”

If someone volunteered to do something, he would let them. This had been Rion’s *modus operandi* ever since his time in the slums. It had been impossible to find someone highly capable back then. That being the case, the willingness to do the task became key.

“John. Have the ranch project proceed unchanged. We will be raising more than just horses after all.”

“Yeah. Alright.”

“Well then, this settles the matter. Whether we end up having horses or not, the defense readiness must increase at all cost. Split the territory army into groups and station them at different towns. We need some guards on the highway as well.”

This time Rion’s gaze never strayed from Kiel.

“Certainly, lord. However, considering the number of soldiers there are limits to how much can we distribute them.”

“I am aware. Stop garrisoning Camargue.”

“Eh?”

“If the attack is on the scale we witnessed the other day, the personnel present in this room is more than enough to deal with it, isn’t it? And if we face a demon strong enough to take down the castle, we can just run away. In that situation having fewer people would create less confusion.”

“...We will abandon the castle and escape?”

“The castle is insignificant in the grand scheme of things. What really should be protected is not those walls but the people that call them home.”

“...I understand, lord.”

Kiel, a trained military man, felt natural resistance to the idea of abandoning the castle suggested by Rion. However, he did agree with the belief of protecting the residents instead of the location.

“That being the case, we need to formulate plans for evacuation if something were to happen. Fortunately, this territory has many fortifications we can escape to. We need to decide in advance on a place to gather in the case this castle falls.”

“Understood. I will take care of this.”

With this, Kiel became the man in charge of defending from the demons. Although nothing was said officially, Rion was already unconsciously thinking in that way.

After this, while considering many plans and verifying the current situation, Rion began to issue detailed orders. Naturally, this involved Kiel only.



The clan heads of Bandeaux had gathered like this many times after their duties finished for the day. However, this meeting was quite different from the usual. It included Rogue Weiss and Bravd Schwarz that had not participated up till now.

Naturally, the first topic of the day was those two.

“A huge failure, isn’t it.”

Said annoyed looking Cassius to Rouge and Bravd. He was talking about the fact that Rion had found out that they had been trying to investigate his identity and how had that happened.

“Well sorry about that.”

Rouge offered her apologies without really looking ashamed.

“Apologies are pointless here. Because of this development, Baron Frey mistrusts us even more and might reject us even if we decide to serve him seriously.”

“...And you think that is only our fault?”

“You disagree?”

“Do you not know why Kiel had barged into the conversation earlier?”

“He’s just trying to curry favor.”

Which meant Cassius actually did not know. This was clear to Kiel who was listening to the side.

“Brother Cassius, I had no such thing in mind.”

“Then why did you volunteer to handle the matter about horses? Aren’t the numerous horse herds we are keeping in the mountains also a secret we should be protecting?”

“Secret? Aren’t things a secret only when they are unknown to others?”

“What?”

“Do you really believe that the young baron did not research this place at all? If he knows the best way to fight within Bandeaux, he definitely knows that what Brother Cassius said was not true either.”

“That’s...”

The strength of Bandeaux was in its mounted warriors whose existence Cassius just had tried to deny to Rion. That cavalry had toyed with the kingdom’s army using the mobility of the horses and the power of a charge.

If Rion knew anything about that past conflict, it would be easy for him to see through Cassius’ lies.

Of course, Bandeaux nowadays did not have the strength it had formerly possessed. But even so, its leaders, dreaming of independence in the future, were hiding that strength from the kingdom. As they were hiding the fact that Clans White and Black specialized in covert operations.

“Furthermore, even if he somehow never investigated the territory, he would still be guaranteed to end up in possession of that information anyway.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Where do you think the workforce for the pastures will come from? It is bound to come from the ranks of former bandits born and raised here.”

“...Are you saying our compatriots would betray us?”

Cassius asked with disbelief but Kiel merely looked at him nonplussed.

“Compatriots? Do we even still have the right to call them that? When they were struggling in poverty we could do nothing for them. But the lord singlehandedly lifted them from banditry and restored them to former, no, to even better living standards.”

“That may be the case but wasn’t tackling all of the matters as one people part of the pledge everyone in Bandeaux has sworn to uphold?”

“That is true when our enemies are concerned. Is the lord an enemy, though?”

“That’s...”

The fact they could not make such a judgment was the exact reason for their worries. They were still unsure whether they should reveal their hidden strength to Rion. And they had no idea what Rion would do once they told him.

“We lack information to make a verdict on this. Let’s listen to what Rouge and Bravd learned first.”

Although Kiel, by now, had a rather firm opinion on the subject, he did not want to break the solidarity of the clans. And everyone had agreed in the past that they must know more about Rion before they serve him wholeheartedly.

“You’re right. Alright, Rouge, the floor is yours.”

“Main business of the day, at last, I’m tired of waiting.”

Although she and Bravd were the main reason for the delay, they were already acting as if that didn’t matter.

“Just start already, will you.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Let’s start with his background. Baron Rion Frey was formerly a valet of the House Windhill. His wife was the daughter of Lord Marquess Windhill and, on top

of that, the former fiancée of the crown prince.”

“What!? That makes him a marquess faction spy, doesn’t it?”

If he was a person affiliated with the marquess houses, the supporters of the crown, he was clearly an enemy of the Bandeaux. That was what Cassius thought at that moment but he was simply jumping to conclusions.

“It’s too early for judgments. I haven’t presented all the facts yet.”

“Am I wrong?”

“Just let me continue. Baron Frey was attending the heir of the house, one Vincent Woodville, the older brother of the baroness. Vincent Woodville was executed for high treason.”

“Wha!!?”

Bandeaux was a remote region. But even if that was not the case, they would be unlikely to learn about this because the crown didn’t want the details of Vincent’s case to spread and it was controlling information. Some rumors did spread to other provinces despite that but, since Bandeaux barely interacted with the rest of the country, those never reached here.

“Baroness herself was also charged with the same crime and sentenced to slavery. Yet here she is, married to baron Frey. Her fall from grace is significant and impressive but so is her rise back up from slavery.”

“Was there an arrangement made to clear her free of the charges?”

These things happened and were not unheard of. Lacking more information about the circumstances it was not unnatural for the clan heads to assume that was the case.

“That’s possible. But...”

“But what?”

“I have investigated that personally but still struggle to believe in what I learned. The information was just that much out of this world.”

Rouge was not alone in this sentiment. Bravd, sitting next to her, had nodded in agreement with her words.

“...Just tell us.”

“Right. Let’s start with this little thing then. On the day that our baron’s former master, Vincent Woodville, was to be executed our lord stormed the execution grounds all alone to save him.”

“...Did he now?”

“Eh? Are you not surprised at all?”

The reaction of Cassius was not as Rouge expected. That was because she had not seen the power that Rion had displayed in front of Cassius and the others while she was in the capital.

“I am surprised but I also think he has enough strength to do that. As far as magic is concerned at least.”

“Oh, did you guys find out something?”

“Yeah. He had obliterated a wall of a fortress that was a haven for a bandit group. And in a recent battle against the demons, he displayed two different attributes and used them at the same time.”

“...I knew it.”

“Were you aware of it?”

“The same happened that day at the execution grounds. He vaulted over a fence three times the height of a normal person, the guards attacking him never managed to get close and he was even able to reach his objective. That was enough to make me figure it out.”

Having said this, Rouge had told the others about what transpired on that day scene by scene. About his argument with Vincent and with how the young aristocrat intercepted all the spells aimed at them with his own body. How the knight commander had to intervene himself to capture Rion in the end. And how his life was spared due to the kind heart of the king.

And finally, how, according to the ballads sung by minstrels, Vincent was an innocent nobleman caught in a tragedy.

After hearing the whole story, the clan heads sat in silence for a while. Rather than unbelievable, they found the story of Rion and Vincent rather touching.

A tale of a servant's devotion as he sought to save his lord while laying his life on the line. Although seeing Rion now it was hard to imagine him in such a way, they decided to believe in Rouge's story.

"...So, what now?"

Rouge asked Cassius breaking the silence.

"I can't come to a conclusion. Without a doubt, Baron Frey resents the kingdom. But why would such a person be made a baron? Especially given that he comes from the slums? It's just so improbable."

"So, in the end, there is a backstage deal in play, isn't there?"

"Maybe, that doesn't make his grudge any less real, though. If I were to guess, I'd say he is playing obedient for the time being and is waiting for his chance."

Which was exactly what the clans were doing too. While their intentions might have been the same, Rion's motivation was much stronger. Rion holding a direct, deep grudge towards the crown. The clansmen on the other hand merely inherited the grudge of their predecessors.

In the end, even after hearing what Rouge had to say, the clan heads couldn't come to a decision. The only thing that became obvious as a result of that meeting was that a certain person's loyalty was already with Rion.

Not being able to act together as they agreed previously, they would now proceed along their own separate paths following the plans they thought of on their own.



Around the time the clan heads were racking their brains, Rion was enjoying his time with Ariel. He was affectionately caressing the ethereal skin on her back as they were laying on the bed in their room.

“That tickles.”

“Ah, sorry.”

“I’m kidding. Do continue, when Rion does this it makes me relax.”

“Me too. Seeing Ariel’s lovely body gives me a peace of mind.”

“...Oh? Shouldn’t you be saying it makes your heart race?”

“Yes, of course. But it brings me relief, too.”

Although it was a female body, something he had always hated and what had brought him suffering before, Rion had not a speck of those feelings when it came to Ariel. In the end, Rion had realized that it was merely a matter of his feelings towards particular women. That much was certain.

“How did today go?”

“As usual. I have shown them my hand in full but they still keep lying.”

“Is the secret they are trying to hide really that important?”

“Their rebellious intentions towards the kingdom should indeed be kept hidden but apart from that? No.”

He might not have known the details but Rion had already figured out that they may wish for independence. But the current kingdom would not yield to a strength of a mere powerful family in a remote region. And what the Clans of Bandeaux were hiding couldn’t be more than that.

“You may be having the same intentions but you just can’t ally with each other, can you?”

Rion lacked strength even more than they did. Normally, a person in his position would seek their help as they were holding the same objective. But he didn’t think that way.

“I have no regrets. Foolish allies can be more dangerous than a powerful enemy.”

“Is that a knowledge from the other world?”

“Maybe? I can’t recall the origin of this dictum.”

“I see.”

“Rather than chasing strength, I need to prioritize not showing any openings. This is not the time for extravagant actions.”

If one were to go against the flow of the World, It was certain to crush that individual. In order not to repeat his past mistakes, Rion was going to put up with how things were while quietly scheming in the background.

“The Devil faction has made its first move, though.”

“They have only just begun. There is still time before its revival. There’s no need to rush.”

“But...”

The opponent they wanted to defeat was not something that could be bested even no matter how much one prepared. She may have been told by Rion not to worry but, as one would expect, Ariel couldn’t stay calm.

“I can’t afford to fail anymore. I don’t want to ever lose someone important to me again.”

“...I won’t let you die before me, you know?”

“Esteemed mother-in-law ordered me to never let you die, you know.”

“That’s why if we’re going to face death, we’ll do it together.”

“Right.”

What the two of them wished for was not to enjoy the life they were given but to devote all of it for the sake of their revenge.

Rion had not given up on going against the World. In fact, he had decided to oppose it with all his might, even if it meant abandoning everything he had.

# Chapter 42

## The World Moves

It was a paddock surrounded by a simple fence. There were as many as thirty horses in there, ones that Kiel had promised to gather. Although the final number was not large, given that they were meant to be used for a messenger network, it would probably be sufficient. Of course, Kiel had chosen that amount deliberately with that impression in mind.

Furthermore, he had not only gathered horses, he had also gathered twenty soldiers suitable for a messenger duty. Despite the fact they came from the army, all of them looked rather young, some even seemed to be Rion's age.

This too was intentional. Kiel had decided to leave the task of establishing a relationship between the locals and Rion in the hands of the next generation. He wanted to know what they thought of him and what they wanted to do after meeting him without the burden and influence of ancestral grudges.

He was also thinking that, perhaps, Rion would find opening up to them easier, considering the rift that opened up between him and Kiel's generation.

However, this little scheme of his hit an unexpected snag at the very start.

"Lady Ariel, you need to relax your body, please. If you get too stiff, you'll tire easily."

"R-Right."

Horse-riding training. Ariel had said she wanted to learn horse-riding too, so Rion had taken her with him today. After all, it would be certainly preferable for her to have that skill. So when she had voiced an interest in the subject, Rion took her to this place without hesitation. But...

"Lady, please be more gentle on the reins. Pulling them suddenly like that might spook the horse."

"I know."

Rion had felt his irritation grow ever since Ariel's horse-riding lessons had started.

"Kiel, is them riding together really needed when she's just trying to learn the basics?"

Rion asked Kiel who was standing next to him. The man teaching Ariel was sitting so close behind her that he seemed to be hugging her from behind. That didn't sit well with Rion.

"W-Well. There is a risk of falling from the saddle so I believe having support from behind just like that is advisable."

"...Aren't they too close, though?"

"Err, he wouldn't be able to support her properly if there was too much distance between them..."

Kiel was desperately offering explanations. After all, the focus of Rion's foul mood was his son, Mercury Blau.

"...Really now."

Kiel's answer made some sense and Rion knew that, so he couldn't really complain any longer. But that didn't help in finding an outlet for his annoyance.

"Shall I teach her then, my lord baron?"

"Mhm?"

The sudden voice from behind belonged to a woman and there should be no other women here apart from Ariel.

Rion turned only to see a girl roughly his age. He was about to ask who she was when...

"Pleased to meet you, my lord. I am Venus Weiss a handmaiden of baroness Ariel."

"...I don't remember hiring you, though?"

"This would be the perfect moment to fix that oversight my lord."

"Oh? And why would that be?"

“Because as someone of the same gender I would be a more suitable teacher for your esteemed wife?”

“You’re hired.”

It was splendidly executed exploitation of Rion’s weak point.

“All is well then. Let me start by knocking that moron Mercury off the horse.”

“Yeah. Go ahead.”

“L-lord, a moment?”

Hearing that his son was about to be violently dismounted, Kiel barged into the conversation in panic.

“What now?”

“Wouldn’t a normal substitution be better than knocking people out of the saddle?”

“...Isn’t that a bit boring, though?”

“Those kinds of things don’t need to be interesting, lord. You too Venus, don’t just go around suggesting such dangerous ideas.”

“Fiiine. I’ll go replace him normally.”

“Yeah. Please do that.”

Venus separated from them and headed toward the horse. Although she had said she would replace Mercury normally, it looked like she started an argument with him instead. One would struggle to tell whether they got along well or not just from this but they definitely were at least close enough to quarrel.

“Lord, are you fine with this?”

“Are you asking about me hiring that girl?”

“Yes.”

“That’s something I’m curious to ask myself. Are the clans on board with this development?”

Venus, who carried the surname Weiss, was clearly related to the head of Clan White. Rion also suspected that she must be the daughter of Rouge, the head of the clan. It was, in fact, exactly as he had thought.

This development made it hard not to think that the heads of Clan White and Blue were no longer acting together with the Six Clans and had started to operate independently. Which was why Rion had posed his question to Kiel.

“To be honest, I do not know whether this is a good thing or not. However, I think it is a good opportunity to think anew about the future of Bandeaux. To consider whether we want to stick to the old ways or forge a new path forward. Something we are well overdue with.”

“I see. This is not something I have a right to interfere with.”

“Even though you are our lord?”

Kiel didn’t wish for a situation where a line was drawn just as Rion’s words seemed to imply. The new way forward he was talking about was for them to follow Rion as he led Bandeaux to prosperity.

“I may be the feudal lord right now but there’s no guarantee that will not change. At the very least, I am a stranger to this land and its emotional history accumulated over the years.”

The grudge in the heart of the locals was different to the one Rion was carrying. And although he had not used that word explicitly, it was clear what he meant.

“That’s why lord can become a trigger for a break with the past.”

“...Is that so. As an aside, you calling me lord all the time...”

“Yes? What about it, lord?”

“It’s embarrassing, stop that, please.”

“Eh?”

“As you heard, I find being called like that all the time rather embarrassing so I’d like you to stop. I don’t mind if you call me Rion or Frey. And don’t go calling me Lord Baron either. That’s just as bad.”

In the past, Rion was the one to always use honorifics. Therefore being suddenly spoken to in that manner made him feel uncomfortable and he disliked that greatly. The only reason why he had put up with that situation so far was because he and Kiel were not in a relationship where he could request the other party to drop the formalities.

But now, from his point of view, a lot of that distance was gone.

“...My liege...”

“My liege?”

“Sire...”

“Don’t make me repeat, no honorifics.”

“...Seigneur.”

“It sounds like simpleton.”

“...I am out of ideas.”

“Give it more thought then. And I guess it’s time I stopped watching and started to practice myself.”

After all, he requested today’s training to happen so he could improve his own skill. Rion had, at this moment, joined the practice. As one would expect, he didn’t need anyone to support him from behind like Ariel had. He was already capable enough to travel on horseback all the way from the capital.

Jumping on the saddle and straddling the horse in one move Rion made it gallop immediately. Since it was self-taught, his way of riding looked quite overbearing to others but at the same, time it was strangely smooth, so much so, that even Kiel was quite surprised.

“Hmm... If he’s like this, I guess Mercury won’t be able to teach him.”

His son could only teach people the standard way. Kiel felt that having typical method forced on Rion would only waste the unique style the young lord learned by himself.

In the end, he personally assumed the task of instructing Rion, both in the horse and in the sword. From that day onwards, Kiel would withdraw from the political matters and devote himself fully to teaching baron Frey.



A meeting was being held in a conference room. Rion had begun to call everyone together at set intervals due to increasing numbers of policies being implemented. That was because discussing the projects individually in smaller groups didn't offer enough insight into knock-on effects on other policy areas.

So periodically all the government officials would be gathered and seated around the conference table.

From the perspective of Rion, who was sitting at the head, the chairs on the right were taken by the former academy students and the chairs on the left were occupied by the Bandeaux clan heads.

"Mercury, why are you here?"

Cassius asked seeing Mercury seated diagonally in front of him.

"I am lord baron's personal guard."

"Personal guard?"

"Yes. As demanded from the territory's head of security."

"...What happened to Kiel?"

It was the first time Cassius was hearing anything about Mercury getting promoted like that. He very much wanted to ask Kiel about it but the head of Clan Blue was not present.

"Father had deemed himself unsuitable to politics. He had decided to devote himself to his job in the army from now on."

“What!?”

“Well, it’s not like he had any position in the government anyway.”

“...Venus?”

Mercury wasn’t the only newcomer to these meetings. Venus, seated next to him, was present for the first time too.

“Yes, uncle?”

“Why are you here?”

“I am the baroness’ lady-in-waiting and protector.”

“Lady-in-waiting and protector?”

“My job is to tend to Lady Ariel’s needs and serve as her shield in need.”

Naturally, this was also something Cassius heard for the first time. By the way, it was news for Rion too but because Ariel listened to that with a smile on her face and did not object, he opted not to say anything.

“...What about your mother?”

“Last I heard the chief was forbidden from entering the castle, was that not true?”

“The chief?”

Rion reacted to her words first.

“I was taught to be particular about one’s rank, even if the person in question is my mother. That is our way of doing things, lord.”

“That I understand, but isn’t the title you used somewhat unorthodox?”

“...There’s little point in fussing about small details, lord.”

With this Rion understood that Venus’ choice of words was not really a custom in their clan.

“Now then, before I start the meeting, is it fine to think of that last participant as a family member?”

Not comprehending his words, Cassius and others only stared blankly. Only one person reacted to that.

“...Inexperienced.”

It was Bravd, the head of Clan Black.

“A relative then, good. I’d suggest not to try approaching magic users in the future while you try to hide. It’s not possible to erase one’s presence enough and you will be noticed.”

Rion didn’t use the term spirits. If he did, he would have to explain the concept. And that was not only hard but also required otherworldly concepts that would cast further doubt on his origins.

“That was only lack of skill.”

“So it is possible then, eh?... I see, you really are more than a normal thief.”

Hiding one’s presence in front of the spirits. This possibility had strongly attracted Rion’s interest but he decided against asking about the details. At the very least, this was not a place for such discussions.

“Unlike our ancestors.”

“...So your clan were thieves in the past?”

“They were.”

“...How concise. So your clan started as thieves that moved into covert operations after improving their abilities, do I have it right?”

“You do.”

It was as Rion had said, the past Clan Black was a simple band of thieves. However, one day, the leaders had noticed that there was more money in gathering information than there was in gathering possessions of others. So they had stopped their previous

activities and started to sell words for money.

The story behind Clan White was roughly the same. They were a nomadic folk with no permanent home. In order to obtain food for their people, their women had begun to sell their looks and their craft. Until the day they discovered the same fact Clan Black did, that there were merit and coin in gathering information. And that the stories they heard within the bedsheets could have surprisingly high value.

As their usual activities had slowly changed into various covert operations, the two groups had become aware of one another's existence and had naturally started to work together. Rather than trying to crush the competition, seeing the potential born from the difference in their methods, they had chosen the path of cooperation instead.

Neither Clan Black nor Clan White had ancestral ties to Bandeaux, they had simply picked it as a base of operations because they thought that a land without a lord would be perfect for them.

"Alright, I think we have digressed enough. If it's just family, it's fine to start without paying it any mind."

Although he remained expressionless on the outside, Bravd was very surprised by those words. He had taken that seemingly carefree statement as a proof of Rion's willingness to them. And trust was essential for your information to have any value. However, not many would be willing to extend it to a covert existence. The fact that he did so, made Rion a rare individual.

"John, start us off."

Rion simply started the meeting seemingly oblivious to Bravd's surprise.

"Certainly. The maintenance of the roads, the vicinity of the national border excluded, is mostly complete. The underlying preparations for the work on the mountain stretches are also finished."

"How many garrisons in the end?"

"Four manned garrisons. There are also four unmanned evacuation posts."

"That many already? That was fast."

“The shelters are little more than a sturdy wall, a basic spot to retreat into. We plan to send patrols from the military post at set time intervals. If those patrols, dispatched at the same time, fail to meet at a shelter that’s located at the halfway point, it will mean something had happened.”

“...That’s good. This has been well thought out.”

“Of course. After that, what only outstanding problem is repair of the mountain roads. How advanced is the preparation of the garrison troops for dispatch?”

“What’s the progress on forming the new garrison squads?”

The question was meant for Cassius. After all, he was the person responsible for the entirety of the territorial army. Sort of.

“Assembly of the third group is in progress. We expect it to be done soon.”

“Then dispatch the first one. Have them be ready by the end of the day and on the road tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“The provisions and arms meant for the first garrison are ready to go. We are just waiting for your soldiers.”

“...Understood, lord.”

The clan heads might have been capable tacticians but the logistic setup behind their soldiers was poor. That was the biggest weakness of Bandeaux. They might have had plenty of military service men but they lacked skilled civil officials.

“Any news about cooperation with the Ox Kingdom and the Hashu Kingdom?”

“We have obtained their consent to work together on border security. From what I heard, showing them a demon carcass proved to be a great help. Furthermore, we earned some favor by informing them of the danger immediately.”

This question was answered by Sept, who was also an alumnus of the Royal Academy.

“What kind of defensive measures did they undertake specifically?”

“Same as ours. Military posts and evacuations shelters along the main roads. We agreed to share responsibility across the national borders. The patrols there will be obviously coming from both parties.”

“Did you explain our preparations to them?”

“Was that a bad thing? I figured that earning their trust would be the current top priority.”

“No, that’s not really a problem. We’re not trying to hide those preparations and if it’s going to help earn their trust then all the better.”

Although the relationship between the territory and the two countries was pretty much nonexistent, the impression those two kingdoms had had of Bandeaux so far was not good. Not because of their attitude towards the Kingdom of Gran Flamm but due to the bad reputation the territory accumulated up to now. Rion wanted to turn that around to a favorable impression. He desired their future cooperation on many things, such as trade.

“Let’s see... The territory security measures and formation of new troops have been discussed and just need implementation. Any further demonic beast countermeasures require road repairs to be completed first, right?”

“More or less. We’ll deal with any new issues as they rear up.”

“Alright. Let’s move on to the economic initiatives.”

“The selection of suitable agricultural land is done and the farms are already operating. Because the chosen locations were already cultivated in the first place, we might be able to harvest faster than expected. However, the maintenance of the water sources is still a pressing concern. We also urgently need to expand the amount of cultivated land.”

Farms in the areas surrounding discarded fortifications. This initiative was doing way better than Rion and the others had expected. That was partly because the people who lived in those forts as bandits before were also cultivating them properly. Now the job for Rion and the rest of the territory government was to utilize those places fully.

“What about the sewage and garbage treatment facilities?”

“That still requires more time. Although we know they are necessary, we still don’t really know how to make them happen. It’s not like we can just dump the effluent down the river.”

“Of course. If you do that, the water in the whole territory will get polluted.”

“We’ll have to make some kind of place to gather and manage them. We need a location and personnel for that.”

“Use people who committed serious crimes. It may not be as harsh a penalty as forced labor but it’s still a job that no one wants to do. That fact will be enough of a punishment in itself.”

“Alright. I’ll do that.”

The sewage treatment was a mean to prevent outbreaks of diseases. But even though Rion knew Bandeaux need that, he had no concrete idea how should it work.

Nevertheless, he still wanted to do it. That was because the will of Ryou demanded proper disposal of sewage and trash. His modern sensibilities couldn’t bear an environment filled with scattered waste.

The devastated Bandeaux may have been temporarily derailed by the appearance of the demons but its journey to revival was still well on track.



The time he spent alone with Ariel was the opportunity for Rion to relax after a hectic day. They usually, after a period of bonding, had a loose conversation about nothing in particular which helped Rion to refresh his mind. Today, though, his mind ended up completely blank without the need for talking.

“Did it feel good?”

Ariel asked, looking happy, while he was staring unfocused towards the ceiling.

“...Hearing you say that kind of words makes me embarrassed, you know.”

“I see. Still, how was it?”

Ariel wanted to know his thoughts no matter what.

“It was... Really great I think.”

“Really? That’s good then.”

“But why do you ask?”

Although it was good for the night activities with Ariel to be fulfilling, Rion was bewildered by her conduct that was completely out of character for a former aristocratic lady.

“I have also found myself a teacher.”

“Teacher?”

“Rouge Weiss.”

“What can she possibly...?”

Because their conversation was taking a turn towards a subject he knew nothing of, Rion started to feel anxious.

“Oh, isn’t that obvious? Various methods to make Rion happy.”

“You mean...”

Sometimes, like now, Rion failed to comprehend Ariel’s train of thoughts.

“I found it’s actually more fun to observe agonizing Rion than to slap his cheeks.”

It would be more accurate to say that rather than studying to please her partner better, she did it to be able to tease him more. In the end, Ariel just really liked teasing Rion. She considered that her own privileges as his wife.

“Ari, that’s not something people usually learn from others.”

“Didn’t Rion say it felt good, though? Besides, those techniques aren’t the only ones I’ve learned.”

“There are others?”

“A method to prevent a pregnancy, for example.”

“Ah...”

A sound of surprise escaped Rion’s mouth. He didn’t expect that his worry and attempts at using contraception as much as possible were even noticed by her.

“Although it’s not perfect, I was told that it considerably reduces the possibility.”

“.....Ariel. It’s not that I did not want to make a child with you.”

“I know. We shouldn’t until all the things are behind us. I also feel the same way.”

“I see...”

With their situation uncertain and their lives at risk at all times, they could not afford yet another weakness that a growing child was likely to be. That was something Ariel figured out as well on her own.

Knowing that Clan White used their women as a tool for information gathering she guessed they must have had plenty of knowledge about contraception. Of course, it wouldn’t be perfect but it was still better than nothing. With that in mind, Ariel had turned Rouge into her mentor.

And Rouge, faced with this proposition, had understood the ambition driving Rion and Ariel. Furthermore, she now knew that what the two of them wanted was so difficult they could not afford to have a child.

Rion realized that they were letting their guard down by allowing themselves to think they were in a remote region, away from the main stage of events. So he had begun to prepare himself. However, there was someone, or maybe rather something, that would easily see through Rion’s schemes no matter how remote the place he was in or how much he would prepare himself.

It was the World. It slowly started to move so that it could make the story have as brilliant a conclusion as It desired.



Bandeaux was not the only territory refining their countermeasures after becoming aware of the appearance of the demons. Naturally, the kingdom, upon learning of their existence, would also brainstorm ways to deal with them.

“The information about demon sightings has, by now, spread widely within the kingdom, your majesty.”

The official in charge of the interior ministry, a department tasked with the gathering of internal intelligence, was presenting a report to the king.

“Have there been any casualties?”

“Matters have not progressed that far yet. Those things have been appearing in mountains and forests along the nation’s border, the regions in question are remote and not frequented by many people.”

“Next to the border, huh? Any particular countries?”

“No majesty, all directions and borders are equally affected.”

“...In other words, the probability of them being sent by another state is low?”

Hearing the initial reports about the demon attacks, the king had considered the possibility that they were incited by other countries. But once he was made aware that it didn’t seem to be the case, the situation turned unfathomable to him.

“Yes, majesty. Besides, if all of our neighbors formed an alliance they would just deploy all their armies at once without needing to employ such things like demons.”

“We agree. You’re right.”

The king knew this much already. However, the situation would be easier to manage if it was instigated by another country. Having an unknown factor like demons attack suddenly made it hard to figure out what was happening where and why.

“Nevertheless sire, while there are no human casualties yet, there’s high likelihood of this situation affecting commerce.”

“What?”

“No merchant will dare to approach a country terrorized by demons. Although internal circulation of goods is unlikely to be affected all foreign trade is certain to wither.”

“Calculate the likely financial damage at once. Devise methods to make up for the shortfall with additional taxation.”

If the treasury couldn't get its coin from merchants any longer, it would take it from other people. This statement of the king heralded the increase of the burden on the common citizen.

“But still, just where did those things come from?”

“We have received an interesting report on that matter from a rural lord, majesty.”

“Interesting? How?”

“It seems the demons are capable of magic that allows them to move from one place to another. Furthermore, there is an unknown being controlling them from behind the scenes.”

“A transportation magic? Does something like that even exist?”

Even the king had no knowledge of magic that could move objects from one place to another. If such a magic were to be real, the way wars were fought would change greatly.

“The report said that a magic circle was also discovered at the location where the demons have appeared. The description is incomplete in places but the army magicians found underlying logic behind it and are researching the subject as we speak.”

“When will the analysis be done?”

The king was equally worried about the appearance of the demons as he was interested in the transportation magic.

“I believe it's a difficult subject. Currently, they are busy investigating other places

where the demons were observed for signs of a more complete magic circle.”

“We see. That information is not only interesting, it’s valuable too. Which lord sent it to us?”

“The source was Baron Frey of Bandeaux.”

“What?”

“Furthermore, we are considering that territory to be the first place where the demons have appeared.”

“How did they fare when attacked?”

The king had already been made aware of the poor condition of the barony. Learning that demons had attacked such a place, he would be naturally worried.

“There was no casualties, majesty. It was reported that demons were encountered in the mountains and exterminated immediately. There were no further sightings in that region.”

“Is that so... Exterminating demons, gathering information and submitting a good report in the aftermath, huh? We don’t think it will end just with that.”

“Majesty?”

“Nothing, good man. We are just talking to ourselves. Do continue.”

The king believed Rion was not a person that would just wait for the orders from the Crown after reporting. Having been given a chance to call him to the capital for a personal presentation of facts, Rion’s father decided in his mind to do just that.

And so Rion, despite planning to lie low until things were settled, was going to be forcibly dragged to the stage just like that. This was because the World had begun to recognize him as a crucial character to Its story.

# Chapter 43

## New Event : The Royal Ball

A crowd dressed in gorgeous outfits gathered inside the royal castle's grand hall where a ball was being held. The vastness of the hall, the number of participants, and the extravagance of the food was on a completely different level compared to the event held at the Royal Academy.

That much was obvious, though. Not only was this ball a genuine one but it was also held by no other person than the king.

Even though organizing such an extravagant event at a time of frequent and widespread demon appearances raised controversy. But given the lack of casualties so far and fears that suspending planned events would expose the graveness of the situation to the citizens, the Crown ignored arguments against it and went ahead with the ball.

This ball was an annual event. It was also an occasion attended by a considerable number of aristocrats, so the noble ladies tended to spend a long time preparing for it. And that probably didn't help at all in making it easier to cancel.

Anyhow, since the event was held as planned, many of the attending nobles enjoyed themselves very much right now. Of course, because this was an event sponsored by the king, that gathered most of the high society, it would be more than just pleasure time. Many participants would line up to greet the monarch seated on his throne at the far end of the hall and then proceed to where the aristocrats were gathered to try striking a conversation with them. Not all of those were small-talk and pleasantries. For the nobles, events like those also served as a place to conduct diplomacy with the other houses.

However, all that took place only around the venue's seats of honor at the front of the hall. The guests that were seated at its back, near the entrance of the hall, were nobles just barely qualified to participate. They were not granted the honor of an audience with the king, nor allowed the privilege of a dance with their more distinguished peers, they were merely allowed to savor the ambiance of the occasion.

And to enjoy the extravagant food.

“Rion. It’s in bad taste to be eating all the time.”

Rion was scolded just like that.

“But there’s nothing to do besides eating. And I don’t even drink alcohol.”

“Try to enjoy conversation with people.”

“With whom exactly? There’s no one who would even want to converse with a baron, noble from the bottom rung of the aristocratic ladder, much less with a newly ennobled one.”

“Hmm... You’re right. And we don’t even know anyone either.”

Even Ariel, a former noble lady from a Marquess lineage, could not spot any familiar faces when looking around. And to be honest, there was no way any of her former acquaintances would be seated at the bottom end of the table.

Nobody had even shown a sign of trying to attempt a conversation with them, so far. They didn’t really feel like starting one either. Rion still had nothing to offer to establish good relations with the other houses.

“Shall we leave then? Our attendance has been recorded already.”

“We must not do so until his majesty leaves his seat.”

Departing from the hall before the king and queen would be seen as rude. Even if one decided to leave his seat, the custom forbade going outside.

“Haa. Why were we even called? Just traveling here and back will take two months.”

If you were to ask others present, Rion had just casually blurted out a pretty surprising statement. Having one’s name on the list of the ball’s guests could already be considered an honor. Just this alone ensured that those who sat at the bottom would find the event delightful even if it were boorish.

“Even so, we still cannot refuse to come.”

“I guess...”

An unexpected invitation to the ball had arrived from the capital and, what was more, one that had come straight from the queen. Rion didn't want to leave his territory but, as one would expect, refuse to attend was not an option. Furthermore, even though this was called an invitation, there was no RSVP. After the invitation letter was sent, the attendance was already as good as decided, thus it would be way more apt to call this a summons.

“But it's still boring.”

“That it is.”

Although she felt that Rion's words were rather impertinent, Ariel shared the same feelings.

This was the very first boring ball that Ariel had ever experienced. The events young Ariel had participated in might have not been up to the scale of this one. But back then she had been one of those at the head of the table and the balls she had experienced had been busy places where one had to converse and dance with the other participants that were coming one after another.

She had never found herself in a situation just like this in which no one would want to keep her company.

If one becomes terribly bored, there's a growing desire for a conversation with just about anybody willing. And that would change the situation at a stroke. Just like back in the times of Academy's cafeteria Ariel and Rion attracted the consciousness of surrounding people.

He, in his black knight outfit with silver accents. And she in a refreshing, pale, light-green dress.

Their clothes might have been far from extravagant but regardless of that their beautiful faces still became the center of attention. However, their aura discouraged any attempts at frivolous small-talk.

And right at that point, something even more surprising happened.

“Baron Frey, I presume?”

Rion was asked by a maid that appeared out of nowhere. Even though she was a servant, the woman of respectable age, was exuding a dignity unthinkable for someone of her station.

“Yes, that’s me. Is there something the matter?”

“The Queen has called for you. Please follow.”

“...Eh?”

The surroundings were even more surprised by those words than Rion but the maid just continued talking to Rion ignoring everyone else completely.

“Her majesty wishes to talk to you. And your wife.”

“...Is that so.”

Rion looked at Ariel with a silent question. The place the queen was at, was next to the king. Going there would mean passing by numerous, higher-ranked nobles, many of whom Ariel might be acquainted with.

And not a few of them were bound to look with ridicule at the former aristocrat reduced to a mere wife of a distant baron.

Rion was full of worry but Ariel just nodded lightly and accepted the offer. For her being the wife of Rion was not something to be embarrassed about but something that should be boasted with pride. After all, it was not a political marriage. She was able to tie the knot with the man that she loved.

“Well then, we should depart at once if you don’t mind.”

Saying this, the maid started to head back. Rion and Ariel followed without delay.



Because the maid that came to get them had a rather important position, nobody tried to obstruct their way as they approached the seats of honor and they were able to reach the top of the table easily. This made Rion understand that this attendant had enough authority to clear the way among the high-rank aristocrats.

But even though their path was unobstructed, the piercing glares coming from all sides weren't exactly pleasant.

And for some reason, those looks bothered them despite the fact they should have gotten used to them already. Reflecting on that revelation, Rion noticed for the first time that he had experienced noticeably less of them ever since he had entered his new fief.

Soon, finally, they saw the throne and the queen sitting beside it. At the same time, they started hearing gasps coming from around them.

Guests that were sat close to the thrones were the highest echelon of the kingdom's aristocracy. Many here knew Ariel's circumstances.

That, in turn, led them to wonder why Ariel, who should have been turned into a slave, was in this place right now. Having those questions arise in their mind was a natural thing. And it wasn't just about Ariel, even those who knew Rion very well were caught by surprise and went still.

The young couple didn't even try to meet any of the gazes, though, and simply headed towards the Queen.

Instead of resenting those who looked at them so, they took solace in the warm stares of Ariel's parents that were mixed in the crowd.

But it wasn't as though Ariel's disinheritance was void, so they couldn't afford to behave as though there were still some connections between them.

"Frey!"

The Queen, seeing Rion's silhouette in the crowd, called his name loudly. Although to Rion, that name was his family name, not his given one.

Hearing her, Rion and Ariel hastened their steps and soon ended up in front of the Queen.

"...It has been a long time, your majesty. I have arrived to answer your invitation."

Just the Queen's voice calling her son's name was enough to gather all the attention. Everyone was full of curiosity, interested in what would transpire next.

“You’re right, it has been a long time. It’s very reassuring that you look fine, though. Incidentally, you have grown quite a bit taller, have you not?”

“Yes, your highness. I finally reached the height that can be called average.”

“Oh, were you perhaps conscious of your small stature?”

The Queen was smiling, looking as if she was enjoying her conversation with Rion. Apparently, she had forgotten that their blood connection should be hidden.

“I was, a little. I believe it is better for a man to be tall.”

“I would like my children to stay small forever, though.”

The Queen had indeed forgotten to hide it.

“Highness?”

“I-... Ah, I meant, that when I had first met you, you were really small like a child. That left a very deep impression on me.”

“Is that so... I considered myself more grown up back then.”

“Now, you indeed are. I have also heard that you have married.”

The queen looked at Ariel while saying that. Ariel, who was waiting at the back until now, stepped forward next to Rion to pay her respects.

“It is my pleasure to meet her highness, the queen. I am Ariel Frey.”

“Greeting me as if we never meet before, I see?”

“Of course, highness. I am but a wife of Baron Frey.”

“I see. It’s not unexpected seeing you beside each other like this, you are truly an excellent match. It might be somewhat late but do accept my congratulations.”

“I thank you very much, highness.”

Ariel, receiving the queen’s blessings, broke into a happy smile and her gaze wandered

to Rion who was standing beside her.

But that gaze then immediately returned to the Queen. It was very unlike Ariel but at that moment she was staring at the monarch's face without restraint before studying Rion's face once more.

It began to dawn on her that Rion's face looked just like that of the Queen. The blue color of the eyes looked as though it was transferred to Rion outright, both the hue and the brilliance being exactly the same.

"I know Ariel. That's why I am giving my heartfelt blessing to your marriage as the queen of this kingdom."

Once again, words of a blessing were said. However this time, Ariel was aware that it was not just a mere blessing. The queen was trying to convey something. Without a doubt.

"Highness. Being your loyal retainers, me and my husband will strive to repay the queen's favor."

What the queen was trying to convey was properly understood. That was what Ariel tried to imply with her response.

"I see. I shall be looking forward to it."

"Well, your highness. I think it is time for us to excuse ourselves."

Rion, oblivious to the queen's feelings, just wanted to leave the place in a hurry.

"I see..."

Unsurprisingly, she could not hold them in this place any longer. Rion was a mere baron. Him being allowed to hold a conversation with the queen was already unusual.

"Ah, do wait a little bit."

But Rion was stopped. The King, of all people, had wrapped up his conversation with someone else and came to them. This was, extraordinary, an exception beyond all exceptions.

“What now...?”

Rion didn't want unnecessary attention drawn to him. He replied trying to conceal his bewilderment.

“Now, now, don't be so disagreeable. It's an important matter.”

The king casually shrugging off Rion's lack of courtesy made all the witnesses very confused. With this, even though both of them were very conscious of the surroundings, they managed to inadvertently gather all the attention on them. This, perhaps, was also a proof that they were father and son.

“Is this, by chance, about the demons, majesty?”

“You guessed it, as expected. The demons appeared on your land first, We wish to hear the story directly from your lips.”

“So I guess they have appeared elsewhere too. Are there any casualties?”

“Minor, still, it's not something that can be ignored. We would hear your opinion on how this should be dealt with.”

This was also extremely surprising. It was unheard of for a king to ask the opinion of a lowly baron.

“My opinion...”

Rion found himself unable to reply immediately. Nothing good would come from him offering his advice here. And if by some chance, the king had done as he suggested, the future consequences would be even worse. Many of the people present here were involved in national politics. A lot of them could be expected not to think well of the fact that the king asked Rion alone for advice.

“I believe, majesty, it would be more appropriate to ask other people for advice.”

In the end, Rion decided to push all the troublesome things to others.

“What did you say?”

Having his request unfulfilled made the king angry. But Rion continued talking

without paying any mind to that. He thought it would be easier to just elaborate instead of soothing the monarch's anger.

"I believe there are people with much deeper knowledge of the demons and the proper ways to deal with them."

"...Is there anyone like that?"

And just as Rion expected the king had swallowed the bait.

"Yes, majesty. They are even guests of this ball."

"Guests of the ball? Who may you be speaking of?"

Following the king's question, Rion's eyes, for the first time tonight, moved in the direction he had so far avoided. The place where Arnold and his coterie were gathered.

"The person just there, Lady Maria Theodore."

Rion's finger went up to point straight at Maria standing next to the Crown Prince Arnold.

"...Hold on. What are you talking about?"

"I have once committed a misdeed. Not as serious as my assault on the execution day, nevertheless..."

"Like We said, where are you going with this?"

"I have secretly taken a peek into a precious notebook that Lady Maria had kept on her person. Just enough to see a small part of the first page."

This was a lie, of course. Rion had pilfered all the valuable information he could from that book. But there was no way anybody else would be able to know that. Furthermore, Maria couldn't question that carelessly. If anyone else was to take a look at the contents of that book, she would find herself in a spot of bother.

"...And?"

"I have seen mention of the Devil inside. And descriptions of things that would be

happening from what on.”

“What?”

“At that time, I didn’t understand why such a thing would be written down. It is quite rare for a lady to be so immersed in simple nursery tales.”

“But you think different now?”

“Yes, majesty. Now I think that this woman knows of the demons and the Devil that controls them. And that, perhaps, she might be the prophesied hero of the legends.”

The room erupted with noise. Some people started to speak ill of Rion, telling him to stop saying stupid things, others were making a ruckus about the return of the hero from the legends, and lastly, there was a fully convinced group showering Maria with questions.

The verbal petard Rion laid out exploded splendidly.

“Silence! Be quiet all of you! You are in the presence of his majesty!”

The loud shout came from the knight commander, who was giving Rion a terrible glance while yelling to silence the crowds. He was, correctly, thinking that Rion had said all that intentionally expecting this to happen.

Because the knight commander’s intervention was successful and the turmoil calmed down, the King was able to speak again.

“Is what Rion is saying true?”

The question was aimed at Maria.

“That’s...”

“Do you have knowledge of the Devil’s return?”

“That’s... I do...”

“And of how to deal with that?”

“I will defeat the devil with our group. That is my duty.”

Despite being hung out to dry by Rion, Maria affirmed without giving it much thought. Her being the one to subjugate the devils was a determined fact and she was convinced that this scene was made for that purpose.

“What about being the hero of the legends?”

“What is this hero of the legends?”

“Have you come from a different world?”

“Ah...”

Maria never expected to be asked a question whether she came from another world. She reacted like she was hit straight into the weak point.

“So that was the case... Is the group you were talking about the one you are with right now?”

“Yes. They are the one’s who will fight with me. But there will be others too.”

“Does Arnold really need to be involved?”

“Arnold is the most important among them all.”

What Maria thought of was his importance as her future man but the king understood her words as her needing his strength. He was aware of his son’s martial prowess. He found it natural that it was needed for the fight against the Devil.

“Alright. In that case, we shall further discuss the countermeasures tomorrow.”

“Yes, certainly.”

With this, Maria’s activities would become acknowledged by the kingdom allowing her to act freely. It marked the start of her endeavors as the protagonist. In the game, at least.

“Now then... Eh? Where did Baron Frey go?”

“He had departed already. He said he could not bear being the object of so much attention.”

The queen answered the question of her husband frostily.

“And you allowed that?”

“Yes, my lord husband. He was, after all, subject to a torrent of ill words from all directions.”

“That guy...”

If the Queen had allowed his departure, the King wouldn't be able to make an issue out of it any longer. Not that he really had any plans to do so. He was just cross at Rion's sly retreat from this situation.

Given the circumstances, Maria's story was dubious and she herself acknowledged that fact. But the king judged it as truth anyway.

And his majesty was not about to give up on Rion even though the boy managed to successfully deflect the subject of demons onto Maria. Also, above all that, it was not as though the World has decided to release Rion from the script.

# Chapter 44

## Overlapping Expectations

After the ball at the castle was over, Rion and Ariel headed to the slums for a happy reunion with Ain and the others. After enjoying a lively and carefree banquet, completely unlike the royal event, Rion had spent next three days in meetings about the situation of the slums and the progress of the group's expansion to other towns. Once that period passed, he and Ariel immediately set out to return to Bandeaux.

While on the road, they always spent the nights in back alleys of the towns on their route. They never approached the sort of an inn ordinary aristocrats would choose as their lodgings. This was both to meet Rion's underlings that the organization had dispatched there as well as out of caution in case someone present at the ball would try to act against them.

That, actually, proved to be effective. There was indeed a group of unknown affiliation trying to follow them that was forced to abandon its mission having achieved nothing.

The only people truly aware of how deep was the connection between Rion and Ariel to the slums were Lord Marquess Windhill, his wife, and Charlotte, who knew that Rion had some sort of connection to suspicious people. But she would never dispatch people to pursue the Freys nor would she speak of anything she should not be talking about.

Even to the Crown Prince himself.



The person shocked the most by the events of the ball was Crown Prince Arnold. He had not been aware of Baron Rion Frey and his wife's existence for two reasons: he had never involved himself with affairs of state and people that had been aware of the particulars decided against telling him, fearing it may trigger some sort of outburst from the prince.

Thus, Arnold, blissfully unaware, had simply assumed that Rion must've been exiled

to some faraway place. But then, suddenly he was there, right in front of him, a guest of the ball sponsored by his father and boasting the rank of a baron. Furthermore, Ariel, who should've become a slave, was Rion's wife.

And to add insult to injury he had to witness one more astonishing development as he stood there paralyzed by the surprise.

Arnold's mother, always looking depressed for as long as Arnold could remember, was chatting with the couple in good humor and had even given them her blessings. He had absolutely no idea why had such a thing been happening.

But in the end, although the events had shaken him greatly, the crown prince was, unsurprisingly, no longer gripped by jealousy. Nevertheless, he had still sent a group to pursue Rion and obtain all the details for his own gratification but the men dispatched came back empty-handed.

So to Arnold, the ball just brought disappointment.



And then, the next person. Someone, who also felt disappointed by the failure of the pursuit, and at the same time someone, whose intentions had been clearly malicious

It was Erwin and what had shaken him had been the appearance of Ariel rather than Rion. His half-sister, who should've fallen into slavery, had somehow attained the position of a noble's wife, even if that noble occupied the bottom end of the hierarchy. And that husband, Rion, somehow had good enough relations with the queen to make her summon him for a conversation. Even the king himself had decided to cut short his discussion with other aristocrats to join his wife. He had been unable to imagine a single reason that would justify Rion, a mere servant from the slum, having that kind of a position in the court. That didn't stop him from seeing them as a threat, though.

He feared the couple's continuing existence as nobles was a threat to his position. And any child they would end up having would be an ever greater one.

It was impossible for Rion to become the heir of House Windhill. Neither was it possible for Ariel, found guilty of a crime and banished from the family. Their child, however...

Would Lord Marquess Windhill abandon his grandchild, the offspring of Ariel on whom he doted so much?

Just thinking about that made Erwin begin to fear for his future. The, completely groundless, rumors that he was not a legitimate child of the Lord were still spreading. Their lack of veracity wouldn't make them any less of a problem if they were to be used against him. For Erwin, who ruined his half-siblings with the help of a lie, this was a reasonable worry.

He had to do something about this problem. Prompted by that truly simple imperative, he had sent assassins after the Freys but that attempt was no more successful than Arnold's. And now he feared his murder plot becoming public too.

Thus Erwin had fallen into the same kind of mental mire Arnold was suffering from before.

He was obsessed with doing something about the marriage of Ariel and Rion. But the land of Bandeaux was too far and currently outside his reach.



Charlotte was also surprised by Rion and Ariel's appearance at the ball. However, she, as opposed to others, had felt genuine goodwill towards the couple.

She had seen that the two of them, instead of ending up at the bottom of an abyss of misery as could be expected, had become a couple that positively radiated happiness. And then those impossible lovers had received the queen's blessing for their marriage.

She couldn't believe that the world could give birth to such a miracle. That surprise was rooted in a sense of wonder, not incredulity.

And although she had known it wasn't proper, for a brief moment she had thought that maybe Vincent's death was necessary for the sake of bringing the two together.

She also wanted to experience that kind of love, to cast aside her position and rank. Charlotte, in her heart, began to embrace that kind of dream.

She wanted to love someone who would be willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of his beloved. Just like Rion. He might have been a bit clumsy and thick-headed but

his concern for his partner was heartfelt. He might have been a bit cold, to the point of being cruel at times, but to those precious to him he had kindness that would bring others to tears.

Charlotte wanted to meet that kind of person, to be loved just like Ariel.

And then she awoke to the thought, that she wanted to meet Rion again. To see the boy she had not met for a long time, whose face was still beautiful but now tinged with masculinity.

She wanted to speak with him again, even if she wasn't sure what about exactly.

And those thoughts made her giggle spontaneously. She wanted to meet him and those thoughts, this desire, began to well up in her heart.



To Maria, the reappearance of Ariel and Rion was not surprising at all. In the game, Ariel ended up married off to a distant lord. It just happened that the lord in question was Rion. The only thing she was not expecting was that there would small be a minor happy end for Ariel hiding behind that storyline.

And that fact had completely erased all feelings of guilt lingering in her heart. Seeing how things turned out convinced her those two ended together thanks to her efforts.

When she turned her thoughts to Rion, she expected that he might perhaps still end up being an ally.

The events of the execution grounds had given Maria quite a shock. Rion had stopped her full-force magic attack effortlessly, with just one hand. He might have been a rare character but that display of power had been far too overbearing.

From then on, she had begun to look at her strength with cool head and had started to train anew. Now, she was confident that she was much stronger than she had been on that day.

But even so, she still desired Rion's strength.

It had become public knowledge at the ball that Rion had personally fought and exterminated demons. While she knew that at this stage those demons would not

really be a big deal, it still made her frivolously want Rion to be of some use in her own battles.

Thanks to his support, she had suddenly gained the backing of the kingdom for her Devil Subjugation quest. That gave her a rather favorable start compared to the game. There, the officials were refusing to recognize the existence of the demons, forcing the protagonist and her comrades to leave the capital and begin exterminating demons and devils on their own in the course of their travels. Only when the damage caused by the attacks could no longer be ignored did the kingdom offer their backing in recognition of their subjugation achievements.

Those seemingly good starting conditions didn't give her any peace of mind, however. On the contrary, she expected that to raise the difficulty of the opponents she would be fighting in the future.

Ever since the ball, she had been anxiously asking herself, if her group could really challenge enemies like that.

She didn't know that the reason why Rion had revealed the existence of her notebook was not just to escape that situation but also to jump-start her quest so that the story would end faster. This way her protection period would also expire quicker, as her plot armor should vanish with the conclusion of the story.

While she was oblivious to his motives, she too thought that the faster the story ends the better. After all, what awaited her once demon subjugation was over was a luxurious lifestyle as the crown prince's wife and later, as the queen.

She began to think she needed more comrades. Ones as strong as Rion. Or even better, she needed to make Rion her ally at all costs.



Although all of the game's key characters had some sort of reaction to Rion's reappearance, they were not alone in that. There was soul-searching going on in the Royal Castle as well.

Two people, without consulting each other before, met in the room where Rion had been given audience in the past – the King and the Knight Commander. The reason why they met to rethink the case of the Freys was simple, they were starting to feel

apprehensive about Rion once more.

“...Your thoughts?”

The Knight Commander didn't need to ask what was the question about.

“Like a statesman, and he completely looks the part too. He should be a novice and yet he completely overturned my expectations.”

“People with practical experience differ from those that had none. I guess it's better to start as young as possible.”

The King said this not only to cover for the shortcomings of Arnold but also to stop the old knight from growing even more wary of Rion.

“It is still not late to reconsider.”

“That may be so but honor demands otherwise. Matters of honor aside though, what's the actual state of that place?”

“Do you not know?”

“I thought we have been able to excise the cancer thanks to that person but it seems the work is not done yet. Oddly enough, I received no reports about Bandeaux.”

Naturally, Rion's official complaint about the corruption of the territory's officials had reached the ears of the king. The monarch was enraged by the fact that such irregularities were occurring in the territory under his direct control. Despite his desire to have the matter thoroughly investigated and offenders disposed of, the report about the barony of Bandeaux had not reached him yet, making him think it was still incomplete.

That was just his misunderstanding, though. The government departments were already busy with all that had been happening and having so many officials punished didn't help matters. Truthfully, being unable to replace missing workforce easily, they just had no time to pay attention to the matters of a remote region.

“Investigations conducted by my order are also lacking, nevertheless, it seems that the territory is on a steady path to recovery.”

“Any more details?”

“He started by subjugating the local bandits.”

“Starting with military operations, really?”

Simply exercising the power of one’s army was not the right way to govern. Meaningless fights, even if victorious, would just exhaust the country’s strength.

“That is what I initially thought myself but it seems that I was wrong. The bandits captured in the process were made to repair the roads and work the fields.”

“Ohh. So it was done to secure a workforce, wasn’t it.”

“Because of all the corruption, Bandeaux was essentially bankrupt. If that really was his original aim, then that was a brilliant idea.”

The Knight Commander wanted to stress that Rion’s real intentions were unknown. He didn’t think it would be good for the King to be overly impressed with the boy. Regardless of his opinion about Rion as an individual, he had no intention to let a succession conflict occur in the future.

“As the commander of the knights, what do you think he aimed for?”

However, the King would not allow such sophistry.

“...I believe he did it to secure the workforce.”

“Why?”

“From what I heard, the way he treats those people is different than what would usually be the case for criminals. They are being fed proper meals. They don’t seem to be forced to work excessively either. And although their labor starts with sunrise and lasts till sunset, they are granted breaks during the day too.”

“...This sounds so good it shouldn’t be applied to criminals at all.”

Although the King had thought this was due to Rion’s naivety, the next words of the Knight Commander had prompted him to reconsider and conclude that he was mistaken.

“Indeed. However, and again I cannot tell if this was by design, when the other bandits learned of that treatment, they had begun surrendering one after another. I believe it would be reasonable to assume there are no organized bandit groups left in the territory at this point.”

“All of them work on reconstruction-related projects?”

“That seems to be the case. It looks like currently all of the barony’s inhabitants, not just the bandits, are dedicating all their effort towards the restoration of the land.”

“.....I give up. I’m beginning to think that he may even be better than me.”

“Not at all. It’s not as though he was able to get every citizen, or rather retainer to be exact, in his grasp.”

“...Oh, it’s about them, isn’t it, the Bandeaux Clans.”

As one would expect, even the king knew about the Bandeaux Clans. He was not aware there were six of them though.

“Yes. They seem to be maintaining their distance to him. To be honest, my knowledge of this subject is rather vague. I had known nothing about the six clans before but when I investigated them, they turned out to look rather shady.”

Just from a cursory investigation, even though he found no concrete leads, the commander was able to figure out that the clans were hiding something. That was a result of their naivety. They were unable to show things that should be shown without wariness.

“So those kind of people exist in Bandeaux, don’t they...”

“I don’t believe the concern is necessary. Compared to those powerful families he is still of a higher priority.”

In the end, even the knight commander evaluated Rion highly.

“...So, what should we do about that problem in that case.”

“I believe having them reconciled would be the best solution. It doesn’t matter if it’s one sided. If things were to be exposed, as long as that thing would speak even a single

word of apology, everything would end without any incidents.”

The Knight Commander thought that Rion should be the one to ask for reconciliation. That was because he considered Arnold to be a terribly prideful person, even if he and his coterie did not realize that. He arrived at that, incidentally correct, conclusion after the matter of false charges against Vincent and Ariel was explained.

He doubted that Arnold would feel obliged to apologize and suspected that he might possibly even seek to have them be disposed of. Therefore, in order for the relationship between Rion and Arnold to be restored, the initiative to relinquish all grudges should come from the young Frey.

He didn’t consider it impossible for Rion to do that and he thought that because they were brothers, they would be able to reconcile.

“Do you think the wounds will heal with time?”

“...I don’t think it’s impossible but it would help if the distance between them was reduced to the point that a feeling of brotherly affection arises once everything is revealed.”

“You’re right.”

All those various overlapping expectations would entangle Rion. While the motivations behind them varied, their objectives were the same. And when so many people scheme, the outcome is certain.

No matter how much Rion wanted it not to happen.



There was no way for Rion to know the expectations heaped upon him in the capital. He wanted to return to his territory as soon as possible and had set out in a hurry. But once he reached the fief he couldn’t help but notice an oddity.

This was the fourth time he had used this particular road and the situation on the highway was markedly different when compared to the previous three times. There was a lot of traffic this time. A lot of it merchant wagons under armed escort.

Although this was a development Rion wished for, he did not know how it came about.

All the initiatives aiming at boosting trade should still be at the preparation stage.

“Ari, can I pick up the pace?”

“Of course, go ahead.”

Having obtained Ariel’s assent, he urged his horse to speed up.

When they finally arrived in Camargue, they were welcomed by a town full of merchants coming and going all the time. It was positively bustling with energy.

“...What on earth happened here?”

Rion asked the guards at the gatehouse.

“Ah, milord. Welcome back, you must have been tired from your long journey”

Seeing Rion, the soldier on duty came to greet him.

“Thank you. I am curious why are there so many people here, do you happen to know?”

He acknowledged the greeting hurriedly, immediately proceeding to question the guard.

“It is surprising is, it not, milord?”

“It certainly is. I was so surprised seeing the traffic on the way back that I hastened my journey to learn more. Do tell me all you can.”

“Yes, milord. It all started with a single merchant group that crossed the national border.”

“...Why pick one so dangerous?”

In Rion’s mind, only shady merchants would attempt something like that but he was wrong this time.

“Apparently the southern highway was closed yet those merchants desperately wanted to enter our country. Somehow they have heard about another highway to the north that passed through the national border. Ours.”

“So all this happened because the usual merchant route was closed?”

“No, milord. Obviously, that alone would not be enough. That merchant group spent a night in town and has taken a liking to the place. After they left, they have kept spreading the good word about us as they traveled from town to town. That made merchants from the kingdom try using our roads too. And they, in turn, boosted our reputation abroad, leading to this.”

The blockade was just a trigger that helped to spread positive opinions about Bandeaux by word of mouth. And there was only one place Rion could think of that could be the source of the initial good impression.

“...The place that left such a good impression on them, is it Folz’s establishment?”

“There’s no other inn to stay in this town after all.”

“I see... Alright. Thank you.”

Now armed with the knowledge of the circumstances, Rion headed towards the establishment run by Folz. It was an inn, a bar, a gambling den, and a brothel in one. There were other services on offer too but those four were the main areas of focus.

Once he and Ariel arrived at the place and opened the front door...

“““Welcome!”“““

They were welcomed by employees standing in a line, next to a reception desk at the side of the entrance hall, to welcome new arrivals.

“Ah, master Rion. You have returned already?”

Seeing it was them, one of the employees came and greeted him. She was one of the former residents of the capital city’s slums, a face Rion recognized.

“Yes, just now actually. Is Folz here?”

“He is inside. I will go call him.”

“Thank you.”

The front side of the building was occupied by the bar and cafeteria, there was also a hallway that led deeper into the premises. The employee headed into that hallway because Folz was currently in the gambling den.

Since getting him would probably take some time, Rion and Ariel headed behind the reception desk to avoid being a hindrance.

And while they were waiting, a customer appeared.

He looked bewildered by the employee's voices greeting him in unison. Then one of the staff present approached to talk to him.

"Did sir come to dine, or perhaps to lodge?"

"Oh, I came to lodge."

"Perfect. Let us please go to the reception desk in that case."

"Alright."

The customer was led towards the reception desk, just next to Rion, and the employee herself went behind the counter. She took out the inn's ledger and enquired how long the customer was going to stay. Once she got the answer, a single night, she wrote down the guest's name and asked for the payment. With money received, the process of lodging was done.

"Alright, I shall guide you towards your room now, sir. We will help you with your luggage too, please hand it to the employee behind you."

As soon as she said that, another employee headed over to the customer.

"I will take care of your luggage, sir."

"Ah no, my bags are..."

"Place it on the cart, please."

Without minding the customer's hesitation, the employee presented a luggage cart in front of him.

“.....Oh.”

The customer put his bags on the cart as he was told. It seems the fact they would not be manually handled by the staff was enough to make him stop hesitating and consent to the idea. This was, incidentally, not in Rion's instruction but an idea they came up on their own.

“Thank you, sir. Please follow me.”

The employee that handled the lodging process started to guide the guest carrying the keys. The customer followed along with the employee pushing the cart. At the foot of the stairs, the keys were passed to the luggage clerk who carried them and the bags up the staircase. Not saying anything more, the customer simply followed. The other member of staff remained downstairs and bowed towards the guest's back. She then returned to the reception desk with the empty cart.

Watching this scene made the corners of Rion's eyes become damp. This manner of customer service was not something that could be established in a short time. They must have kept practicing even though they did not know when, if at all, would the customers start coming. And those efforts had borne fruit now. The town's reputation was something created by these employees.

“Oh, boss. You have returned.”

“.....Yeah. I just did.”

“Surprising isn't it? Seeing the customers suddenly flooding in this single month.”

“Certainly is.”

“But that's as expected of you, boss. No matter how decrepit a place you come to, it will be completely reborn. Just like how it was in the slums.”

“.....This not my achievement. It was all thanks to the effort every one of you made. Thank you.”

Rion bowed before Folz and the employees. Partly because he could no longer hold the tears and having that kind of face be seen would be embarrassing.

“...But even so, it's still thanks to the boss. We gave our all because the boss is with us.”

“...That’s my line.”

Rion had been giving his best because he had been thinking of them. He wasn’t just working hard for the sake of his revenge only. He held a strong desire to improve the lives of the people who followed him.

Rion was a statesman, that worked hard not to satisfy his greed but for the sake of happiness of others. And he had absolutely no idea how important an existence like that was in this world.

Not only him, though, the important residents of the capital city were just as clueless.

# Chapter 45

## One More Step Forward

The number of merchants arriving in the town had increased causing establishments such as inns and bars to thrive but it would just be a waste to not exploit the opportunity any more. Besides, the service model offered at the reception was guaranteed to be imitated by others soon. It would be hard to maintain the current situation just with these facilities.

Knowing that, Rion established something new, a goods market. The idea was not really groundbreaking – if the foreign merchants arriving in Camargue could complete trades in the town, then, due to its proximity to the border, their costs would reduce greatly. It was actually strange that nothing like this had existed already.

In fact, it had in the past. But it withered and died due to lack of merchants traveling through the barony.

All the transactions at the newly revived trading post were subject to kingdom's border tariffs. Collecting those was the duty of the territory's government and it would, in usual circumstances, lead to increase of the Crown's total tax take from the barony. But Rion actually lowered the merchant rates to a surprising degree when a normal lord in his place would levy an additional local tax in.

Of course, since the tariffs were in under nominal control of the capital, he required a justification and he used the national calamity for that purpose. Once he reported that as a consequence of the demon attacks the number of merchants visiting Camargue rose greatly and he couldn't in his good conscience use that fact to enrich himself on the misery of the kingdom's other lands, no one could overturn his decision.

Rion's real motivation was to bait even more trade to the city. The tariffs were useless for him as they went, almost in full, to the royal treasury, with very little left behind for Bandeaux.

Given this sort of fiscal environment, choosing to conduct transactions anywhere else would be absurd. The merchants would, from now on, without a doubt do business in the town of Camargue. Even if other places started to mimic their services, that would

not be enough to pull the custom away from the town. With that, the profits made by the merchants would be spent on the town's amusement offering and, in the end, still enrich the barony.

Of course, the tax would still have to rise eventually. But Rion expected to be the lord no longer by that point. And besides, it would be best not to rely on tariffs in the long run. Rion recently started to think that the territory government had to be run like a business, based on the fief's residents energy, within its means, and depending on local tax only. The income from the merchants would be a stopgap measure until the day that was possible.

"We reached the target number of cows and pigs. We are ready to start breeding them on our own and restart animal husbandry within the barony."

John was reporting on the progress of measures to achieve that goal.

"Can the present manpower manage as is?"

"At the moment, yes. Also, more people are coming forward to take up the work following other's example. If our breeding program goes well and the number of livestock increases, the next step would be to let those who acquired necessary skills become independent.

"Right. That's fine. Next point of the agenda?"

"The fields are finally approaching the harvest time and the tidings aren't half bad."

"I see."

"It seems the agricultural cooperative approach worked out fine."

"Agricultural cooperative?"

Rion had no memory of ordering such a thing be introduced. He started to think that it might have been John's idea he had tried out on his own but...

"Do you, perhaps, know nothing about it?"

"...I haven't."

“It all started from the farm work given to the criminals. That project, with time, evolved into a cooperative of sorts.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“They started to manage the entire cultivated area as a group. Originally, each family or sentenced person had worked on their own assigned plot of land only. That led to a difference in harvest from household to household, though. After all, they all had varying levels of skill and experience.”

“...Ah, so that’s it.”

This way of managing the land would cause the best practices and experience to be shared amongst the cooperative members. Sharing of the work burden would lead to an improvement of the production efficiency, and being able to make use of each of the workers’ strong points would help too. Of course, both the useful and non-useful qualities of the involved people would emerge in the process but the bad ones would just get “lost in the crowd” without causing any problems.

“There’s something that troubles me, though. I have recalled the discussions we had during the school days in the cafeteria.”

“Did you now...”

Vincent had still been with them during those days. Those memories were both nostalgic and melancholic.

“I remember telling the guy, that had argued for equal distribution of wealth, that his idea had ignored the value of hard work. Seeing this kind of result now makes me wonder which one of us had been right.”

“We are no longer running mental experiments, John. All approaches have advantages and disadvantages. And it’s the job of those in charge to find the right balance.”

“Yeah, you’re right. We are students no longer.”

The majority of the current administration of Bandeaux was composed of the former Royal Academy alumni. They had a lot of theoretical knowledge but little to no practical experience. For that reason, Rion came to think that them achieving so much was a miracle in itself.

“Let’s keep an eye on things. Even though there has been no trouble so far, once things settle down we might start getting malcontents. After all, people are greedy beings.”

“That sounds like something an old, cynical person would say. But you are correct, of course. The critical part comes now.”

The revival of the territory was progressing surprisingly smoothly. But instead of feeling glad, Rion was anxious. He still remembered the false sense of security the seemingly smooth progress of his plans had brought him before and the experience of not being able to protect Vincent in the end had stolen the word “relief” from his heart.

The next mistake he would make would likely result in his death. Not that he feared death, of course, he just didn’t want things to end before his plans came to fruition.



Governing was not the only field Rion had expended effort on, he had also worked hard on military affairs.

And this area was something he was trying to get to grips more. Rion, never expecting to lead an army in the past, had not studied the subject in the past. So not only was he inexperienced, he had no knowledge either.

Furthermore, the Clan Heads were much more knowledgeable and experienced in this field. While they did not challenge him on the governance issues, they ignored him completely when it came to the matters of the army.

Rion never considered their superior abilities a reason to leave all matters involved to them. Although he had not abandoned the idea of learning from the clans, there was still the question of what he could do on his own and how to put that idea into practice. Devising new schemes was something Rion took pleasure in after all.

And his partners in that undertaking would not be the locals but the people that had been sent from the slums in the capital to be trained under the guise of new recruits.

The syndicate was now moving towards the full control of the underground society everywhere along the highway from the capital to Bandeaux. Local gangs would not be made to submit just by using money and connections. A show of strength was also necessary.

That was Rion's goal. And he wasn't after a half-assed strength, he desired an overwhelming force that would make any ideas of resisting obviously foolish. His personal involvement and intervention would be best for this but the fact he was a landed aristocrat made that solution unavailable. So he had to train substitute forces, which is why gang members were being sent to him.

Rion also kept practicing his riding skills but that was less because he liked that and more due to his stubbornness. He wanted to surprise the locals, the desire to make them slack-jawed from amazement kept spurring him on.

And today was the day to reap the fruit of all those efforts.

Far outside the walls of Camargue, on a plain not far from the national border a group of horsemen gathered. Twenty riders each gathered on the north and south end of the flat ground. The southern group made of clansmen led by Mercury, the northern composed of syndicate members under the command of Rion.

What was about to unfold was a mock cavalry battle. Something Rion planned to evaluate the results of his people's training and blow the clansmen minds away.

"Alright everyone, let the skirmish commence."

The bout was refereed by Kiel. That was something the clan head wanted to do himself even if a lack of other suitable candidates was the main reason. He was not only Rion's swordsmanship teacher, he also recently started to train the syndicate members too. And he had a pretty good idea of what type of military maneuvers Rion was drilling them in.

Suffice to say, he was truly interested in the results of this contest.

"...Begin!"

At the signal, the horsemen of the Clan Blue rushed forward at once. In contrast, Rion's group started with a slow trot. The two squads took a completely opposite approach to this contest – the clansmen charging ahead vigorously while Rion was making his people advance slowly in a two file column.

The distance between the two groups shrunk rapidly, even more so because Rion was making his people pick up the pace steadily.

With the two groups on the brink of crashing into each other, riders under Rion split left and right. That made the clansmen disperse trying to match their opponent's maneuver. In the subsequent clash, several cavalrymen from Rion's group were bested and fell from their horses.

Not minding that fact, Rion led his half of the squad to advance forward. Roughly half of his opponents gave chase but those at the back of that group had suddenly fallen from their horses.

They were assaulted from the back by the remainder of Rion's squad. However, those men, in turn, had the other half of the clansmen behind them. At this point, Kiel, observing from the side, thought that Rion was at disadvantage but the young man split his leading detachment into two more groups.

Confused about which of the groups to follow, the clansmen responded with a delay. Exploiting that opening Rion had his two small groups wheel around and hit the opponents at the very back of the chase from both sides.

"Dear me... To think that he really did surpass them..."

Although the match was yet to be decided, the flow of the battle clearly favored the side of Rion. The group of clansmen that gave chase first had their number thinned by that half of syndicate group that was following it from behind. Those that pursued late were thrown into disorder by Rion's flank charges and also suffered heavy losses.

"It's over! The match is over!"

Kiel, judging that carrying on further would only result in unnecessary injuries, stopped the match. Hearing that, both group of riders stopped the skirmish, recovered their fallen companions and their mounts, and headed towards him.

"You ended it at the perfect moment."

Those were Rion's first words.

"...Was it a mistake by any chance?"

"Perhaps. If you hadn't ended it right now, we would end up defeated."

"But the situation was clearly in your favor lord."

“At that moment, certainly. However, our group lacked the ability to dismount Mercury’s men from their horses. That’s why I executed a sacrifice maneuver.”

“Sacrifice?”

No matter how hard Rion’s goons tried, it would take several years for them to catch up to the level of Mercury’s cavalry. If they were to fight one-on-one, the syndicate members would lose ten fights out of ten. That’s why Rion settled on the idea of sacrificing one part of his squad after dividing the whole into two or three.

The sacrificial group would head straight forward and by the time the clansmen stopped and defeated them the other groups would execute flank charges. However, pulling this off was not easy and the attrition on Rion’s side was surprisingly high. Even though it was just a practice battle and neither side was using real swords or spears, the members of Frey Syndicate were still not able to knock their opponents off their horses.

If Mercury had noticed that disparity and avoided a direct assault turning the contest into a skill battle instead, any chances Rion had for a victory would have disappeared.

Kiel had stopped the match before that happened.

“But since things had ended as they did it is still my win. I was able to prove that my method was correct.”

Rion was satisfied knowing that his idea was proved correct in practice. He had tried many different things to bask himself in this feeling. This delight, that something worked out just as he thought it would, might have been the result of his scholarly temperament or a simple craftsman’s pride in one’s work.

The matter did not conclude with just this.

“...We have displayed our own inexperience. Lord, please lead us from now on.”

“Eh?”

Not just Mercury, but all clansmen present were bowing their heads before Rion.

“How to use cavalry formations in practice, eh. Well, the era when a battle could be won with one cavalry charge had undoubtedly been on the wane even back then when

we had lost the war against the kingdom.”

Kiel explained the meaning of Mercury’s group request. It was true that the Clans of Bandeaux had always hidden their strength. However, at the same time, they had made no progress ever since they had lost to the kingdom. Young locals, like Mercury, that had come to know Rion, had become anxious about that fact.

And now that their match ended in such a result they were convinced that time had come to change their methods of fighting to match the modern times. And they believed that Rion could lead them toward that goal.

“...There’s nothing I can teach you, even if you say you want to be lead by me.”

“But lord...”

“That’s why let’s think about the problem together. If we brainstorm ideas as a group, we can come up with better solutions.”

“Ah...”

At this moment Mercury felt that Rion, for the first time, extended his hand in their direction.

“Are you guys fine with that?”

“Yes! We will obey Lord Rion’s command!”

On this day, the Honor Guard of Bandeaux had become Rion’s in the truest sense.

It didn’t take long for the feelings of the Clan Blue youths to spread among the youngsters of the other clans sharing the same anxieties.



Some time later, an unexpected person had arrived in Camargue. It was Ain, Rion’s right hand in the Frey Syndicate. Of course there was a better reason behind his departure from the capital than just wanting to see the boss.

It was, at last, the time for the takeover of all the towns they identified as a target. He came to Bandeaux to oversee that invasion.

“I didn’t expect that you would really come here yourself.”

Rion was also surprised by Ain’s visit.

“It’s the first move after all. Failure is not allowed. Others said that I must come myself in order to make sure things are perfect.”

“You’re right. If we stumbled on the first step, everything later would go awry too. So? The matter of you taking the command aside, is the strategy flawless?”

“This is something I wanted to make sure of myself. Is it fine to run things by you?”

“Of course.”

Although he came to refine the syndicate’s plans and advance the preparation, Ain couldn’t free himself of the anxiety as the deadline neared. His desire to consult with Rion was the main reason he came to Camargue.

If the boss were to tell him that the plans were sound, he would be able to proceed without worry.

“We will use this place as a base to attack these three towns.”

“Hmm? Aren’t those rather big?”

Rion remembered details about every town along the highway. He had examined them during his first journey to Camargue and later, on the return leg of his travel to the royal ball, he stopped at each settlement and talked to people tasked with infiltrating them.

“They are. I know our initial plan was to start from small towns but we have reconsidered.”

That initial plan was something that Rion devised. But now Ain said that this had been reworked by his subordinates.

“.....Why?”

“We figured that us successfully capturing a couple of towns might prompt the other organizations to make move against us. If that turns out to be the case, they will be the

ones on the attack.”

“I see. If it was close to the capital, you could send more people to reinforce but distances involved make it difficult. And you would not be able to repel such an attack with limited amount of people.”

“Yes. That’s why we thought of this method. Considering that possibility, we will just focus our efforts on one place and take over a large town, once that is ours taking down the small ones becomes easier.”

“I think this plan is fine.”

“Really?”

Relief washed over Ain’s face. However, even he knew that Rion wouldn’t let the strategy be limited to just this.

“But is it doable? And more importantly, you know that barely achieving that is not enough, don’t you. Exhausting your strength on such an attempt would be as bad as dispersing it.”

“Yes. We have also devised a solution for that problem.”

“What is it?”

“We have started by creating traitors amongst their ranks.”

“How many?”

“Three.”

“Do they know about each other?”

“They do not.”

“I see. Yes, that should be fine.”

Rion wouldn’t trust any traitors. People pretending to be insiders only to double-cross their employer were not a rare occurrence. Rion asked to ascertain whether Ain was aware of that danger.

If one arranged for multiple traitors without letting them become aware of each other, it was possible to have each of them observe the rest. That made it possible to figure out whether any of them was playing double agent. Rion was satisfied with Ain's measures.

"Once the moles were in place, we had them spread a rumor that a certain person has betrayed their group."

"A false flag?"

"Yes. Targeting a trusted lieutenant of the enemy boss."

"Did that boss believe it? What was his reaction?"

"Judging by his actions, he bought it, so we decided to make a move. The attempt to sow discord was a full success."

No leader would trust rumors about a treachery easily. Still, such a thing could not be ignored, so such leader would be certain to attempt looking for more information. That would uncover "evidence" from another traitor. And if that was still doubted, yet another independent source was on hand to confirm the betrayal.

That being the case, regardless of how trusted was the victim before, a feeling of doubt was bound to arise in the leader's mind. The victim had the leader's confidence exactly because of how much power that lieutenant commanded and how valuable that made him while he was an ally.

Once the doubt was there it was easy to create an impetus for an internal rift one way or another. For example by telling the boss to dispose of the lieutenant before his treachery turns into something serious while warning the victim that he would be in danger if things remained as they were. It wasn't hard to fan the anxiety of both sides just like that.

"Good. Still, it will be hard to find a good timing for intervention. If we do it too fast, the enemy will just close ranks. If we are too late that just gives the victor of the power struggle time to fully grasp the reins of the whole organization."

"Yes. We have thought of that too."

"Oh?"

“We approached that lieutenant and offered him help when the time came.”

“...You’ve really bet all on this, haven’t you.”

If their attempt at contact failed, it might have tipped off the enemy group that it was them that spread the rumors. Once that happened all the plans they prepared would be for naught.

“It’s all to ensure they will fall. Furthermore, helping him lets us comprehensively reduce the strength of the enemy. Even if that guy wins, he won’t have enough resources left to oppose us. He will either submit or we will erase him.”

“What are you going to do if this fails?”

Although Rion already knew the answer, he still asked the question.

“We will pull out. We will delay the whole operation until the time we have increased our strength. It’s not like the enemy would be able to get a foothold in the capital anyway.”

Even if their target knew that the trouble on their turf was stirred by the Frey Syndicate, they would not be able to fight back. Any such attempt would have to take place in the capital where Rion’s people were unlikely to lose. And that, in turn, would open a perfect opportunity to chip at the enemy’s strength.

“Will you now..... Fine. I have no more questions.”

“Boss?”

“I can’t think of a better plan. I believe this is well put together.”

“.....T-Thank you very much.”

Until now they had always moved according to Rion’s orders. But this matter, with Rion being absent from the organization, was something they planned on their own. Being praised so much moved Ain deeply causing him to tremble.

Rion felt similar kind of emotions.

“Frankly speaking, I had this patronizing worry about the prospects of the capital. I

wasn't sure all of you would be able to handle your own even when I'm gone."

"Of course we would. After all, the slums have changed, thanks to and because of you, boss."

"I was worried, yet you are doing fine. And you are capable of changing the lives of the poor on your own, even if I do nothing."

"Please don't say that, boss. Boss Frey will always be our head."

".....Yeah. I promised that after all. It's just..."

Although Rion was on the verge of tears he shoved those emotions aside due to one concern.

"Yes, boss?"

"I just thought about it now but isn't calling ourselves the Frey Syndicate quite a bad thing?"

"Eh?"

"I am Baron Frey. If you name the organization the Frey Syndicate or even just call yourselves like that unofficially, won't people in Camargue and elsewhere think that it's my syndicate?"

"Well, the group is your syndicate, boss. It would be bad for an aristocrat to be known as the boss of an underground organization, though, right?"

"It would be."

"What can we do then?"

"We have no choice but to change the name, right?"

"What's our new name then? It's boss' organization, you get to decide."

"Me? I guess..."

Rion had begun to ponder the problem seriously. Having suddenly been forced to

think of something, he was drawing a blank. Maybe if “Syndicate” was bad, making it “Company” would do. But that was pretty much the same thing. But once he became fixated on the concept of an underground society, his train of thought suddenly took a turn.

At that moment, Rion’s finger reached his mouth.

“What will it be, boss?”

“Resist.”

“Eh?”

It’s a word that Ain didn’t understand, something that was not of this world.

“It means – to oppose.”

“Oh. It sounds cool, doesn’t it?”

“Right? I thought that since we’re looking for a new name, we might as well find something cool. If you have no objections then it’s decided, we are Resist.”

“Yes. Understood. I will pass it on to the organization.”

The name of the Frey Syndicate was changed to Resist. Although Rion didn’t explain the reason, he thought of this moniker due to his desire to oppose the World itself.

However this name would soon gain different connotations. But that story would not be told anytime soon.

# Chapter 46

## The Prepared Stage

While the revival of Camargue's was accelerating, the situation of the kingdom as a whole was heading in an opposite direction. The casualties caused by the actions of the devils had grown too large to be ignored.

The knowledge about their existence, initially limited to the outskirts of the country, had by that point spread widely and there had been casualties in villages across the land. But even so, during that time their numbers had been low and it had been possible for the local militias to subjugate them.

However, gradually the threat had been growing beyond their ability to cope. Small groups of demons appearing in the vicinity of the national border had been merging together with the others growing in size with each repetition of the process. Insignificant packs capable only of attacking villages had become larger bands able to raid towns and those, in turn, had swollen into hordes capable of threatening cities, causing the scale of casualties to escalate.

Of course, the local militia and noble retinues didn't just stand by doing nothing. But the demons displayed intelligence completely at odds with their appearance and began to exploit boundaries of noble fiefs to foil the army attempts at intercepting them whenever they were found by patrols. No local militia or retinue could just enter a territory outside of their jurisdiction and this internal weakness of the country was being perfectly exploited. Whenever an army group attacked, the demons would flee outside of that territory and when the soldiers withdrew, they would encroach again.

While the troops were being toyed with in this manner, the casualties among the civilians were growing larger by the day giving the demons more momentum and making subjugation even more difficult in a vicious, self-fuelling cycle.

This no longer was a situation that noble territories could deal with individually. The splendid cooperation displayed by the minions of the Devil required the kingdom to adopt the same approach.

However, the response from the capital was dull and this was partly because of Maria.

She knew all the events pertaining to the fights against the demons. Using that knowledge, she was directing the kingdom's response in the most efficient, in her opinion, direction. Her focus was entirely on the battles related to the events and any other, unrelated, attacks were ignored. It was the same approach that she had adopted when she had studied at the Royal Academy.

It was certainly true that once the devils were defeated, the demon attacks would stop too. And that concentrating all the efforts for that purpose was probably efficient. But only as long as one disregarded the lives that would be lost by adopting such a strategy.

Maria had never discarded her gamer mentality. She ignored the reality of the suffering caused by the loss of life and the despair felt by the families of the victims. She never imagined that the trauma that would cause to the citizens would bring her misfortune in the future.

But eventually, even Maria had finally made a move. An event was drawing near. Its stage would be the largest city at the southern edges of the kingdom, Harcourt. It was there that a large horde of demons planned to attack.

In the game, this would be where the efforts that Maria and her group made towards devil subjugation would finally be acknowledged by the public.

But this was not the game.

Maria already had the backing of the kingdom. She had no more use for public support and recognition. So she did not act promptly to annihilate the demons tied to the event, which was an important step in the process.

In result, unnoticed, the quality and quantity of the demons rose rapidly with the amount of blood being spilled.

The more blood soaked the land the weaker the seal of the Devil became and the closer the time of his revival approached. This was, after all, the reason why the devils were assaulting people in the first place. They required sacrifices.

And as the seal binding Daimon weakened, the power of the devils and their demons grew.

A process Maria enabled perfectly.

For Rion, the increase of pace the events would happen at was a welcome thing, so if the present developments were to be limited to that, he wouldn't really care.

However, the World was not going to let that happen. And it had acted to involve Rion in the upcoming events no matter what.



All of those involved in governing the barony were presently gathered in the audience hall of the Camargue Castle. This was not a conference, they were hosting a royal envoy, messenger from the king bearing orders from the capital.

"...Baron Frey is thus required to participate in order to discharge his duty to the Crown."

Rion descended to the foot of the table while listening to the words of the man. And shaking with the uncontrollable anger.

The proclamation delivered by the royal envoy was ordering him to raise an army and take part in the upcoming demon subjugation. Furthermore, he was being dispatched to defend a city called Harcourt which was so totally unrelated to him, he didn't even know where it was located.

"May I ask one more thing, good sir?"

Rion felt like praising himself for managing to keep his voice level.

"Yes, sir baron?"

"Why me? My fief is Bandeaux here. That... Harcourt place is far outside my jurisdiction. Isn't there a local lord in charge of matters in that area?"

"Your army was rated highly and selected for this assignment, sir baron. Shouldn't you be happy that's the case?"

To be honest, even the envoy should consider that reason bogus. An army of one fief being dispatched into another wasn't just a rare occurrence, it simply didn't happen unless the kingdom was at war with another country. And besides, there shouldn't even be a need to use noble retinues as the Crown itself had enough troops at hand. So this was an answer that didn't satisfy Rion in the least.

“...Who was responsible for the selection?”

“Your participation, sir baron, was proposed by his highness Arnold, the Crown Prince, and approved by his majesty, the king, himself. A great honor.”

Rion could not comprehend what the envoy was thinking when he mentioned that the Crown Prince had intervened in this matter. Did he really believe in the excuse of selection and consider it an honest, perfect opportunity for a provincial baron to be acknowledged by the next king?

Or was he fully aware of the background linking the two of them and harbored a most unlikely grudge against Arnold?

“When am I expected to report myself at the muster point?”

“First day of the anterior month of water.”

“.....”

Rion had no idea what that meant but Ariel, who was standing behind him all this time, offered an explanation in a murmur. The royal envoy used an old, formal calendar in which January was the anterior month of the moon, February the posterior month of the moon, and so on for the months of fire, water, wind, and earth. The anterior month of the water was July, so he would have to report on the first day of July.

“I understand. Incidentally, I take it that the Crown will cover any and all expenses resulting from this summons?”

“Sir baron? To think that you would worry about money to this extent...”

This, honestly, shouldn't be really that surprising. Even though Bandeaux was undergoing a revival, it still didn't have much room for extra expenses.

The envoy's reply was intentional, though. All he wanted to hear was a “yes” or “no” reply from the fief lord. Any sort of negotiations beyond that were above his station so was indirectly telling Rion to just agree without complaints.

“This remote region is rather depopulated, my good sir, and our finances are quite tight. If the burden of the expenses were to fall wholly on us, we would have to...”

However, Rion's words were a total opposite of what the royal envoy hoped for. They were a reasonable and obvious excuse that if there were to be no funds, the army couldn't move.

The man miscalculated banking on Rion's sense of duty and loyalty to the kingdom.

"Ah, I see. Please rest assured, sir baron. I will convey your concern about funds to his majesty, the king."

Somewhat flustered by Rion's intransigence, the royal envoy reassured the young baron that the king would be appraised of the territory's financial troubles. That was, of course, not the same as being guaranteed reimbursement but pointing that out would achieve nothing. And Rion wanted to avoid angering the man too much. Having to face false accusations brought about by offended messengers was a frequent occurrence in the history books Ryou had read.

Rion now understood that he had no choice but to go along with this order. The envoy wanted Rion's assent at all cost. Trying to oppose this would be a mistake.

"...Please do tell his majesty I'm honored to oblige."

"Is that so... Splendid, sir baron."

The man's face cheered up immediately.

"Now that the official business is done, I'm sure good sir is tired of the journey. This town has certain... amusement establishments of good repute. I am not sure they will meet good sir's refined taste but sadly we are a remote region and can only ask your indulgence."

"Is that so. They will have to do, I guess. If it can't be helped, I will put up with the inconvenience."

The face of the royal envoy did not match his words. He had heard the rumors about Camargue. He was aware of the town's recent reputation for the best amusement offer in the east.

"Fantastic. Girls, please guide good sir to town."

"Yes, lord baron."

One of Ariel's bodyguard-maids stood up ready to guide the guest. She was a member of Clan White, of course. Following the girl, the envoy left the room with spring in his step.

".....fucking with me."

"Rion..."

Once the messenger was gone, Rion spat out words of rage. Hearing that, worried-looking Ariel embraced him and held his hand.

Her husband's grip was bereft of strength.

"Why does it have to be now? It's still not... Damn it."

Rion complained to nobody in particular with eyes cast to the floor.

Ariel was able to sympathize with his feelings. He should've already broken free from the chains of the game. Able to quietly wait and prepare for the plot's conclusion on the sidelines.

And yet, the World didn't let him do so. As if sneering at Rion's plans, it was dragging him back to the main stage. The humiliation and the fear of losing once again escaped from his lips.

Ariel could understand because she knew the truth. Others simply saw the young baron lamenting forced departure from Bandeaux which was well on its way to revival.

And that would make them misunderstand and think that Rion cared about the territory this much.

But regardless of what they thought they were seeing, none of those still present in the room did anything but watch. They could find no words of consolation.

The silence in the audience room lasted an eternity. And then it ended, as it was bound to. Rion raised his head while glaring at the empty space ahead.

"...Bring it on. If that's how you want to play, then I'll make you regret dragging me back."

With those words, the strength in his eyes returned and they shone far stronger than ever before. Everyone present felt he had found a new resolve.

“Bravd.”

“...Lord?”

Bravd was surprised to have his name called for the first time since they had met. Not that he let it show.

“Send your subordinates to Harcourt. The numbers of the demons, their movements... Just investigate everything and report once done.”

“...Lord.”

I want the information exchange to be more meticulous. If possible, by someone at hand”

“Behind.”

At the same time as Bravd said that, a man on his knees appeared behind Rion with head bowed.

“...The usual person?”

The presence he was giving off was something that Rion had already felt before.

“Chandra Schwarz, lord.”

The youth with the name of Schwarz was a relative of Bravd, a son to be precise. He was someone Bravd had placed near Rion from the start and he was always concealing himself in the vicinity of young Frey. If Mercury was Rion’s overt bodyguard, Chandra could be said to be the covert one.

“Alright. I’ll be counting on you.”

“Lord.”

Chandra was taciturn like his father.

Showing no obvious interest in that, Rion turned to face the others. His next instructions were imminent.

“Cassius.”

“Milord.”

“Prepare the army for departure. We are going to war. If you don’t want your comrades killed, leave all the frivolous grudges at home.”

“...Of course, milord.”

Being faced with that kind of words he couldn’t show any reluctance. And he had the intention to do so anyway. Once he was going to war, he would not hold back even if the enemies were to be demons. That was Cassius’ nature.

“How many can you assemble without leaving reserves behind? We’ll mobilize everything we got.”

“...A thousand.”

Cassius answered after a moment of thought.

“Would that be forces of Clan Red alone?”

“No milord, that’s the total numbers of clansmen with clans White and Black excluded.”

“That’s unexpectedly small.”

Not just small. They were supposedly concealing power required to revolt against the kingdom someday. With that being the case, Rion expected them to have tens of thousands fighting strength. A mere ten hundred would be easily crushed by some local militia.

Rion thought that the secret that Cassius and the others were trying to keep so far was just absurd but he expected nothing would change even if he voiced that sentiment, so he kept his counsel.

“Does that number include soldiers patrolling the territory right now?”

“Yes.”

“...Then pick four hundred.”

“Four hundred, milord?”

There were roughly 200 soldiers in charge of guarding the territory. If one subtracted that number, only 800 would be available to go along with them. And now Rion, who already considered this force small, wanted to take an even smaller army. Cassius couldn't understand Rion's intentions.

“400 or 800, there's no real difference. That being the case, less will be better. Our mobility will increase and the costs will fall.”

And if Rion were to choose between demon subjugation and defending the territory, he would pick the latter without hesitation. So he was going to leave behind a number sufficient for that purpose and ended up only 400 with him.

“Also, do we have spare horses? I want to change them on the way, so I guess we need double the number even if the quality is lacking?”

“...If 400 is needed, I can arrange it. “

There was a hesitation to this answer. In other words, Cassius was lying. From Rion's point of view, it was extremely easy to figure him out.

“Arrange, one thousand. And people to look after those not chosen as primary mounts.”

“A thousand? Why would we need a thousand horses, milord?”

“To shorten the time required to arrive at our destination. We need spares to switch to when main ones tire and in case of unforeseen accidents.”

“...We are going to ride with no rest?”

“Maybe? I still don't know my limits. Anyhow, think of something to make us arrive at the destination faster. And match the numbers of horses accordingly.”

“...Understood, milord. May I ask, why are we in such a hurry?”

“I am not. I’m telling you to do this because I want to delay our departure as much as I can. It will be best if you did not miscalculate or we might not make it before the deadline.”

“...Yes, milord.”

Rion decided to shorten the period of participation in the conflict by as much as he could. For that purpose, even if he was an unwilling warrior and putting the numbers of his force aside, he would apply all his available might without cutting corners. And that meant using Cassius and the others without reserve or hesitation.

“Mercury.”

Continuing, Rion moved his attention to Mercury.

“I understand, lord, the preparation of the honor guard will be accelerated.”

“That’s not what I want, you guys are staying here.”

“What!?”

Mercury was surprised by the unexpected instructions. It was a natural reaction, he was after all the leader of Rion’s honor guard. It was expected that those men would follow him when he departed to fight.

“Bandeaux cannot be left unprotected. Someone must remain behind.”

“My lord, we are your honor guard!”

“And that’s exactly why. You are my most trusted subordinates, there’s no one else I can entrust this task to.”

“However...”

He was happy with Rion’s words but he really couldn’t accept being left behind.

“Your task is the hardest one. Demons may come to Bandeaux again. When they do, you must not let a single person be harmed, be it a citizen or a traveler. If the world concludes that Bandeaux is not safe, the momentum behind our revival will wane immediately. That cannot be allowed to happen whatever the cost.”

They managed the only safe route to other countries and that was what allowed the barony to prosper. All of them knew that, Mercury even better than the rest as he was spending all his time along Rion in the course of his duties.

“I... Understand lord. I will make sure to live up to your expectations.”

Now that he was no longer being simply left behind and was given a huge responsibility, Mercury was satisfied. He had taken Rion’s decision as a proof of his trust towards him and his men.

“Ariel.”

“You are not trying to tell me to remain, are you?”

She replied back in no time. And she was smiling with that particular smile of hers Rion knew better than try to oppose.

“...No, of course not.”

They would be together in death. They had sworn that, so, facing that smile, Rion convinced himself it meant going together to dangerous battlefields as well.

After all, he knew that even if he tried refusing her permission to go, he would be the one to give in in the end.

“Then me too, me too! It will be my first time going somewhere far. How exciting.”

Venus in a carefree manner assumed that if Ariel was coming then she, the baroness’ bodyguard, should come along. However, that would not happen.

“You’ll stay, Venus.”

“Ehh? Why?”

“Because, to be frank, members of your clan are a burden on the battlefield.”

“But...”

Although she was surprised, she could offer no counter argument. Her clan might have been one of the six but like Clan Black, their specialization in covert operations was of

little help on the battlefield. Their craft and the way they weaponised desire were excellent, but not suited to an armed clash.

“Protect the territory alongside Mercury. Make sure the citizens do not get agitated by the army’s departure.”

“...Fine.”

Although frustrated, Venus accepted Rion’s orders. She knew perfectly she was in no position to complain and that it was her fault that she could be nothing more than a burden.

“John, Octo. Please prepare the provisions and equipment needed for the departure.”

“Alright, we’ll do it.”

“Consult with Folz when procuring stock. From what I heard, the provisions in Orcus and Hashu are cheaper to buy.”

“Is that so?”

“It’s likely. Folz is well connected and has the latest information, working with him will be worth it.”

Resist now had a foothold in the neighboring kingdoms as well, although the organization’s activities were so far limited to information gathering.

“Alright.”

“Oh, and Sept, while I remember.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. Notify those countries that we are dispatching troops, request assistance in case we come under attack.”

“...Is it really a good idea to let our neighbors know such a thing?”

Sept doubted the wisdom of letting potential enemies know the territory would be weakly defended.

“There will be no problem. They wouldn’t attack even if we were completely defenseless.”

“...I guess that’s true.”

Even if those two kingdoms tried to exploit the opportunity and invade Bandeaux, they would end up being crushed by the Gran Flamm Kingdom’s retaliation anyway. Sept’s worries were unnecessary.

“And that’s why it’s better just tell them. Even if we’re not really wanting for troops to defend ourselves.”

“I see. What you’re doing is pure courtesy.”

Given that Bandeaux’ diplomatic policy was to further improve its relations with the Orcus and Hashu kingdoms this kind of exchange wasn’t bad at all.

“That’s right. And furthermore, if they accept the request for reinforcement we gain from that too. It would give us both materiel and peace of mind.”

“In that case, it would be better to hasten the negotiations. An urgent dispatch perhaps? Preferably by your own hand.”

“I’ll prepare it immediately.”

“Alright.”

“I guess that’s enough for now. You know the plans, go do your jobs.”

“““Yes milord!”““

The Bandeaux army would depart one month from now, all the clansmen wearing armor painted in flashy colors corresponding to their clan name.

The clan heads couldn’t know that this simple deployment to help in the conflict would be the greatest opportunity for them to spread their name across the country.

# Chapter 47

## Event: Defense of Harcourt

Harcourt, the largest city in the southern parts of the Grann Flamm Kingdom, was the branching point from which the royal highway extended to various other places in the region. That geographical advantage made it into the largest commercial hub of the south.

The goods produced in the area, and in the neighboring countries, would always naturally flow toward Harcourt and only from here would they be carried into the core and the other regions of the kingdom. The reverse was also true. The goods market at Camargue could not even be compared to this place.

Right now, Harcourt was giving off a military-like ambiance unthinkable in a place with this kind of reputation as a trading district. It was all due to the sudden appearance of an army – three thousand of the kingdom's knights. At the same time as those troops arrived, the city was informed of an incoming demon raid throwing it into mayhem. Due to its location, somewhat removed from the national border, the settlement had been developed as a purely commercial city and it was not prepared for a siege. It was, in consequence, natural for citizens to get anxious.

Only once the fact, that the Crown Prince himself had arrived to take part in the conflict, came to light, did the people regain their peace of mind. Not because they felt reassured by his protection but rather because they did not expect him to be sent to a dangerous battlefield. A reasoning that would raise complex emotions in Arnold were he to hear it.

Nevertheless, the residents of Harcourt followed the orders of the Crown Prince and the local feudal lord locking themselves in their own houses in preparation for the upcoming attack of the demons. The only people moving about the town were the knights of the kingdom and the local levies.

But it wouldn't take long for that hurried scurrying about to cease. The preparations for repelling the demon raid were finally complete.

The defense of the city was concentrated around its southern gate. This was Maria's

suggestion, based on her knowledge that the demons would approach from that direction.

The whole three thousand strong army of knights was assembled in a line in front of the gate. Two thousand of those were mounted. Outer wall on each side of the gatehouse was manned by local militia armed with bows. The rest of the local levy was standing by behind the gate as reserves.

There seemed to be a certainty that there wouldn't be any attacks from other directions.

The army headquarters were also set up on the curtain wall. That was the case due to Arnold being stationed with the archers, as it would be easier to use offensive magic from up high.

"...They're not coming, are they?"

Muttered the Knight Commander while everyone around him was nervous with the raid looming large. He was also participating because Prince Arnold and Maria's group lacked experience in leading an army to the battlefield, regardless of their combat prowess. He would be the one to command the army while Arnold and the others would be left to attack the demons on their own.

"The scouts say they will be here soon."

Replied Prince Arnold to the Knight Commander's remark. However, he misunderstood its subject.

"Ah, no, highness, I was not referring to the demons."

"...Oh, I understand now."

It was the Crown Prince who wished the army of Bandeaux to participate in the war. There were other people interested in making that happen as well but Arnold was the one to make the request.

But Rion's troops were still absent, even at this late moment.

"I wonder if something happened?"

“According to missives, their departure was quite late. Perhaps, that was the reason.”

The Crown Prince had never even considered that his summons might be declined. Had that happened, Bandeaux rulers would have to be punished accordingly. Even Arnold didn't want to do such a thing.

“Mhm. However, would that guy ever make such a mistake?”

If their absence was caused by just a delayed departure, then, in the end, that would just make them late. Knight Commander didn't think Rion wouldn't ever make such a foolish error.

“...We can establish the reason later. For now, let's just focus on our battle with the dem—”

“They've arrived!”

The rest of Arnold's words got buried under the shout of a soldier on a lookout duty. It hadn't been the Bandeaux levies that had arrived, though. A dark shadow had spilled over the plains south of the city. The demons were closing in.

“...Frederick?”

Crown Prince Arnold reflexively called the Knight Commander by his name due to the unbelievable sight before them.

“Fifty, no, eighty thousand... Probably. With such variance in their shapes, it's rather difficult to get a better estimate.”

Even from a distance, it could be seen that the enemies were not just of one kind. Other variants, large enough to be conspicuous, were mixed in with the horde.

“Maria, what are those?”

“They're too large for me to determine. However...”

“However what?”

“I never expected so many of them to come.”

“What!? Are things going to be fine!?”

They conducted their preparations fully trusting Maria’s information. But now that the enemy that came was different to what she expected, Arnold became anxious about the battle’s prospects.

“Of course, we can defeat them. However, a little more prudent approach to this battle might be better. And we can just ascertain what kind of demons came while fighting.”

As long as she recognized what kind of demons there were, she would know their weaknesses. And with that, they could just adjust their tactics accordingly. Maria had never for even a moment considered a possibility of defeat.

“Well then, I guess we shall wait, huh?”

This question was aimed the Knight Commander, who in response sent a signal to the troops below to stand by.

Slowly, the silhouettes of the demons became clear. The overwhelming majority of them were Goblins but that was not all that faced them. There were hordes of Orcs further to the back and behind those one could see numerous shapes of demons clearly different from the rest.

“...Ogres? A-Are you kidding me?”

Maria’s voice was betrayed that she was clearly shaken. Once again, the reality proved to be beyond her expectations.

“What is it?”

“...There are demons present that are stronger than I expected here. Ogres, Oni to put it simply.”

“Oni?”

People of this world couldn’t possibly know about the existences called Oni.

“Nevermind, what matters is that they’re strong.”

“...Are we still fine?”

Arnold wasn't a coward, he just feared that if they were to lose, the residents of Harcourt would be the next target.

"Yes. We will just have to weaken them with magic as much as we can. They can't use spells themselves."

"I see. So we will have to wait until they come really close."

Spells too had effective ranges. And those were, in fact, unexpectedly small. Because of that, while knowledge of magic could give an overwhelming advantage in an individual combat, it was not always an asset in a war.

In enough numbers, catapults and ballistae would produce a comparable effect at safer range.

The effective reach of their spells was the reason why Arnold and the others were stationed on the outer walls. Casting spells from a higher vantage point would enable them to attack targets located a little farther than usual.

Thus the prince and his coterie were waiting for the enemy to enter their range. Which did not happen.

The enemy horde stopped advancing.

"...They're not coming closer at all."

"Indeed, highness. It's as if they know the range of our magic."

"I guess it's wrong to judge these things by the appearances. What are we going to do now?"

"Wait. If we try to assault like this, we'll stray off too far from the walls."

"You're right."

Even the knight commander had no experience battling demons so all of them could only rely on Maria. But the girl's calculations seemed to be completely off and with being the case, they could only proceed cautiously for now. The army's highest priority was the protection of the city of Harcourt, therefore the demon's refusal to attack was not really a problem.

However, there was a reason why the horde didn't advance, one Arnold and the others failed to think of. After all, they never expected the demons to follow a master-plan.

Rion, having arrived late, became aware of this at once.

At the helm of several hundred of cavalrymen wearing armor in three distinct colors, he headed straight toward the knights stationed in front of the south gate.

"The Bandeaux levy, huh? That's quite a flashy armor they've got there."

"They do, highness. And thinking about it, that's fitting. They are divided into four clans and, apparently, they go to war dressed in the colors of their clan."

The Knight commander was also seeing this for the first time and his explanation was based on what he had heard before.

"Nevertheless, only three hundred, huh?"

Both Frederick and Arnold thought that the number of troops Rion brought here was too low.

"I wonder what are they doing?"

Rion and the officer in charge of a knight squadron seemed to be having a heated exchange. But even though the dispute was obvious, it was not possible to make out what was it all about.

Soon, it became obvious that dispute was going nowhere, so the Crown Prince and his retinue came to the lower section of the walls.

Rion looked up and his eyes met Arnold's.

"The demons before you are just a diversion! You need to immediately dispatch reinforcements to the nearby villages!"

The prince was at a loss as to how he should respond to the astonishing message in young baron's words.

"Which village is under attack!?"

Asked the Knight Commander in Arnold's place.

"I do not know the name! And it's not just one place! Three villages to the east are in danger as we speak!"

"...How can that be."

Although, when compared to the population of Harcourt, the number of civilians in danger was small, there still would be casualties. This meant they were outsmarted by the demons and that was a humiliation for the Knight Commander.

"We cannot handle it alone! You need to reinforcements there immediately!"

Once again, Rion appealed for a relief force. However, the army commanders could not answer his plea immediately. There were enough demons facing them here to ruin the city behind them given a chance.

"This cannot be done right now! The demons in front of us must be defeated first!"

Again, Frederick was the one to speak because that was also something that had to be answered and Arnold kept being silent

"Then hurry up and attack at once! How can you even defeat those demons by just standing there!?"

All this was enough to make Rion snap, there was no longer any respect in his voice.

"We're waiting for them to come closer! Our magic won't reach them at this range!"

"What!? Is that all there is to the comrades of the hero from legends? If you can't reach as is, then make it possible!"

"Mind your words, fool!"

The Knight Commander had snapped too by this point. Incidentally, he also thought that if he didn't yell, the morale of people that could hear Rion would be affected.

"Ah, enough already! That guy can stay mum if he wants! And you just shut it and watch!"

Rion clearly demonstrated that he would not put up with being shouted at and that he considered further talk pointless. With this, he departed from under the outer walls.

“What are you trying to do?”

Rather than getting even angrier, the Knight Commander and everyone else in the area became increasingly curious about Rion’s aims.

And young Frey simply started to advance toward the demons on horseback. He was soon joined by Ariel. And, after a short pause, all the clansmen fell in behind the couple.

It was pretty obvious what he was trying to do at this point. But the people watching still couldn’t believe it. The army of Bandeaux consisted just of three hundred riders. And they were about to pick a fight with a horde of demons tens of thousands strong.

The clansmen were afraid as well. But the horses of Rion and Ariel kept advancing and, afraid or not, they had no choice but to follow suit.

Soon the distance between Rion’s army and the demons shortened considerably and two birds appeared over the heads of the clansmen.

“...A firebird, the phoenix!?”

At first, Arnold initially thought that it was the highest grade spell that was passed down within the royal family but almost immediately he rejected that idea.

“I’ve never heard about a wind spell like that.”

There were two birds, one was made of fire and the other was made of wind. They had been summoned by Ariel’s and Rion’s magic. Flying faster than the horses they eventually merged into a single infernal whirlwind aimed straight at the monsters.

And just as the observing people started to think multiple demons would be engulfed, the spell exploded. Numerous demons were sent soaring through the sky, blown away by the blast.

A wide gap opened in one part of the demon ranks. Rion charged into it without hesitation. The Bandeaux riders followed suit.

Only one of their number remained behind. It was Ariel, alone, both her hands raised high into the air.

A light had formed on her arms, slowly growing in intensity until it turned into a huge incandescent ball. She swung both of her hands forward launching the spell that changed from the huge ball of light into a tornado that harmlessly passed through Rion and his soldiers before assaulting their enemies.

Many more demons were swallowed by this tornado and blown away. And as the whirlwind was advancing forward, Rion, hot on its heels was penetrating even deeper into the horde. Numerous flashes of red and blue light could be seen flashing around him.

In considerable shock due to this turn of events, Arnold's group and the royal army were watching stupefied. In a way, this had a greater impact than the first appearance of the demon hordes.

However, this was just the start. The battle had just begun and Ariel had no intention of letting the knights just watch the show.

"Knights of the kingdom!"

Moving away from the front lines she addressed the formation of knights arrayed in front of the wall. Her clear voice echoing through the plains.

"What does the crest on your chests stand for?"

Each knight had a crest etched on his breastplate. It was supposed to be a symbol of their loyalty and courage

"For what purpose do you draw your swords?"

They understood what she was trying to tell.

"Who are those shields meant to protect?"

*Our shields will protect the kingdom and those who dwell within its borders. Anyone belonging to the knighthood would know this oath.*

"And yet you are standing there idle?! Even though there are enemies in front of you

and so many people that need protecting behind them?!”

Her words resonated strongly in the hearts of the knights and soldiers. A strong flame ignited in their souls as they rejected her implicit accusation – they did not fear the demons, they were just following orders.

“Knights and Soldiers of the army! This is your time! Show us your strength, your courage, your valor! Please! Please, lend us your power!”

With those words still loud in the air, Ariel turned back her horse and advanced towards the demons again. Looking over the shoulder at the army behind her she raised her arm into the air again.

“Please! Follow me!”

““OHHHHHHHHHHH!”“

The war cry of the kingdom’s warriors reached the heavens. Carried by its power, Ariel led them toward the fight.

“Split the army in half! The first half is to follow me, the other is to go with commander Frederick!”

Those orders came from the Crown Prince. Arnold had descended from the walls and managed to line up next to Ariel at this point.

“One would think it would be reckless to have you charge in. Leave the rest to me.”

“...Is that really fine, highness?”

“It may be uncertain how we match up in magic but I’m still your better when it comes to horse and sword.”

“...In that case, I’ll leave it to you, highness.”

“Yeah. That will be for the best.”

“Form a flying column! Pry open that gap made by the Bandeaux cavalry!”

The Knight Commander, who followed the Crown Prince down the walls, was already

giving orders to the cavalry attached to him. He charged towards the monster horde without hesitation. Crown Prince Arnold was following right after him.

Meanwhile, in the thick of the fighting.

“Apollo! Give us more space!”

“...I’m trying! I’m trying but there’s too many!”

“Mo-Heitor! Go help him! Attack from both sides! At this rate, we won’t be able to advance further!”

“I am! But!”

Although the clansmen managed to open a gap and penetrate the horde, due to the number of demons their charge started to lose momentum.

“Force the breach bigger, just for a moment! Cassius! Wheel around, we’re going forward again!”

“Understood!”

“Both flanks! Wider!”

“Orrryaaah!” “Push! Force them back!”

The yellow and green clans were trying to force back the demons attacking from left and right. To make the best use of the gap that created, Rion and the clan Red withdrew for a moment in order to gain few extra yards and charge harder.

“Keep going! Stay your course! Charge!”

Rion shouted orders while advancing ahead and crushing demons before him. His enemies were set ablaze, decapitated or deprived of their limbs, that scene was so intense that even the clansmen, proud of their military, were shivering.

“You’re in the way! Moooove!”

What Rion was aiming for was at the very center of the demon horde – an existence giving off a strong magical pressure. He thought that was the being controlling the

demons.

And his enemy's desperate attempts to stand in his way only reinforced his suspicions. Regardless of whether they were being controlled or not, they were certainly protecting something there.

"Hmm?"

Rion suddenly felt that the pressure of the demons had lessened slightly. Searching for the cause he spotted an enemy that turned its back on him trying to face a new enemy.

"...As expected, that old man really is a monster."

That new threat to the demons was the knight commander. Rion could tell even though the old man was wearing a great helm. Even in a situation like this, the man's strength was amazing. He might have had mounted knights at his back but he still reached this far by the strength of his blade only, without using any magic.

"Hmm, I guess right now that's a huge help. Time to work harder as well."

Disturbed by the Knight Commander's charge the demons were distracted and not focusing on the clansmen. This chance couldn't be allowed to slip by.

"Cassius! Apollo! Mo-Heitor! Are your skills inferior to that old man!? Is this all there is to the Bandeaux's best!?"

An obvious provocation. However, there was someone bound to respond and, indeed, Apollo swallowed the bait whole.

"Like hell I'm inferior to that old guy! I have just finished warming up!"

And with that, Apollo, his yell still reverberating in the air, started working harder than before slaughtering enemies wantonly. Cassius and Mo-Heitor were fully aware of the provocation but seeing this they had no choice but join. After all, Apollo was someone neither of them wanted to lose to.

That spurred on the rest of the clansmen and they advanced deeper again.

And then, another current was born in the whirlpool of battle. That was the Crown Prince Arnold and his troops joining the fray, although a little late.

Facing pressure from three sides, the demons were clearly showing signs of unease. Even the being controlling them seemed shaken.

“Brat! Where is our goal!? What is this charge aiming for!?”

The knight commander yelled a question. Even he was starting to find this tough.

“The objective... The objective was fulfilled! Endure a little longer!”

“What are you...?!”

“The flag was raised! The leader of the horde is dead!”

At the rear of the horde a blue flag could be seen. While it might have been unknown to knight commander this banner was the war standard of Clan Blue.

This was one of the signals that Rion and Kiel had decided on beforehand while figuring out the strategy. Rion’s group was to break through the front and penetrate as deep as possible. If they were to be able to take down the leader then the battle would be concluded with that. But in the circumstances where they failed to do that, the hundred riders of Clan Blue were to take a detour and hit the enemies from the back to slay the one controlling the demons while the horde was preoccupied.

Since the controller of the demons might have been an exceptionally strong being, Rion considered this a drastic solution and hoped not to have to use it.

He expected that with Maria, her harem and the Knight Commander present, the army would be able to slaughter the demons easily. He considered this plan viable exactly because he knew that it was a game.

The end result of him not pulling his punches, despite knowing the scenario, was scattering of the demon horde with the enemies desperately trying to escape.

But the kingdom army had no time for pursuit. The highest priority right now was reinforcing the outlying villages that were under attack.

With this, the event concluded. However, its consequences would be much more complicated than in the game’s scenario.

# Chapter 48

## An Unexpected Outcome

When the subjugation of the demons ended, the city of Harcourt became lively again. It was not a return to normal, though, but an outright festive atmosphere. A party was organized to celebrate newly-gained safety from attacks by demons and was being held all around the town.

The main star of the festival was the nameless army from a distant territory. By now everyone was aware of how the battle against the demons played out and of the straight-out-of-a-fairy-tale courageous and resolute way of fighting those strangers displayed.

Local soldiers, with tongues loosened by alcohol, were regaling the citizens with the heroic tales from the battlefield as if they were minstrels. Those sagas delighted many and, in a blink of an eye, spread through the whole Harcourt, to the merchants in the city at that moment, and before long, carried by them, to the whole kingdom.

On this day, a hero was born in the kingdom but only a small number of people could recognize that fact.

The feudal lord of Harcourt also hosted a banquet in his mansion but this event was somewhat different from what was going on outside. While this was also a celebration of victory, it was also recognition of effort of those that participated in the battle. Naturally, not everyone was invited.

The attendees were: representing the kingdom – The Crown Prince Arnold, The Knight Commander Frederick, Lancelot, Erwin, Charlotte and Maria; and from the Clans of Bandeaux – Cassius, Apollo, Mo-Heitor, and Kiel.

Rion and Ariel were not present. The host was informed that he would be late due to matters involving the troops. This was just an excuse, though, neither of the two had the slightest intention of participating. Nevertheless, the tables of the banquet were considerably lively despite that absence. Or maybe rather, the atmosphere was good because the Freys were not here.

“Well, you really did great. To think that you would charge into a horde of a hundred thousand demons with just a few hundreds of cavalry. I received the reports but I still find that hard to fathom even now.”

“Ah well, they might have been demons but they were not really that strong. So even if there’s a lot of them, they’re not really that big of a deal.”

Being praised by the feudal lord put Apollo in a good mood. He would probably never adopt that kind of attitude with Rion present. Baron Frey might be young but, for Apollo, he was still a scary lord.

“Even if that’s the case, that was still a hundred-thousand-strong horde. And using yourselves as a diversion, on top of that, was even more astounding. You won’t be able to pull that off without sufficient courage.”

“That’s an obvious requirement in order to defeat the enemy. Even when you are just a diversions, no, especially when you are in that role, you need to fight with all your might. I just put that ideal into practice.”

Apollo might have said all that but, in reality, neither of the clan heads fighting with Rion was informed about Kiel’s role and the blue clan’s surprise attack. Rion didn’t tell them because, just as the feudal lord’s words had implied, they probably wouldn’t put as much effort into fighting if they knew their charge was just a feint.

“And you sir, your surprise attack was also very well done.”

The feudal lord now addressed Kiel.

“...I merely followed the instructions that I had been given, milord.”

Kiel was not in as a jovial mood as Apollo. He was delighted, of course, but seeing Apollo’s behavior made him return from the clouds.

“That may be so but taking the enemy leader’s head is still the biggest feat on the battlefield. That is always worth praising.”

“As milord has said before, a diversion was in place. The achievement is not mine alone and belongs to all of those who participated.”

“Oh, I see sir is quite the humble one. You seem to be very different from the others

even though all of you come from the same land.”

“Hmph, Kiel is lord Rion’s favorite after all. He knows how to ingratiate himself.”

Irritated by Kiel becoming the focus of the attention, perhaps, Apollo spoke words that should have been left unsaid. Conflicts at home should not be shown to outsiders.

“Apollo. Watch your mouth.”

The warning came from Cassius, because if Kiel said that, the situation might have deteriorated.

“Aren’t you in the same position? Our brilliant lord baron has no time for you either. He is not very fond of unrefined people like us.”

Despite the warning, Apollo didn’t stop freely venting his complaints helped along by the fact he was drunk.

“Can you cut this out already? You’ve drunk too much.”

“It’s fine, I tell you. It has been so long since I have drunk liquor this good. As I thought, Harcourt really is on a different level.”

Finding the rebukes coming from Cassius troublesome, Apollo turned to the feudal lord.

“After all, it’s not called the biggest commercial city of the south just for show. It’s not an exaggeration to say that all the delicious things of the southern region can be found in this city.”

The host was also fond of being praised. He had begun to brag merrily with just a word of compliment.

“That’s really enviable. There’s nothing close to this in Bandeaux.”

“Oh? Hadn’t it enjoyed a period of prosperity recently? I have heard rumors placing the best pleasure quarter of the east there.”

“We cannot possibly visit places like that in our own land. We would be buried by rumors by the next day.”

“I understand and sympathize. It’s really hard not being allowed to fool around when you want to.”

“Exactly! Bandeaux may be gentle to the outsiders but it’s harsh to the locals. The lord himself is an outsider, after all.”

“Then get out.”

Kiel had butted into the conversation. It was hard for him to simply overlook the things that Apollo had just said.

“What?”

“The... Outsider, as you put it, Lord Rion, had contributed immensely to the revival of Bandeaux. Those who do not understand or appreciate how much thought and effort went into that have no right to remain in our land.”

“That...”

Even though he wanted to argue, Apollo could not refute Kiel’s words. The current state of Bandeaux was achieved thanks to Rion. All of its residents would agree with that.

In the end, Apollo also agreed that those who denied this fact had no right to enjoy the blessings that Rion had brought upon the land of Bandeaux.

“We may have drunk a lot but, still, you said too much. If you have complaints, take them to lord Rion. He properly listens to people’s grievances. Don’t tell me you don’t even know this?”

“...I do know that.”

This was true as well. No matter how harsh or strict the feedback was, Rion would always find time to hear comments and criticisms. Apollo was a witness to numerous occasions of Rion being sternly rebuked by the hot-headed Royal Academy alumni.

“If you really do know all that.”

“Fine, fine already. I’m sorry, it seems I got carried away.”

This was actually true. This was the first time the military efforts of Bandeaux clansmen were praised after a whole life of dedication to the art of war. And that was something to be elated about even if the enemies were just demons.

Now, though, that festive mood of theirs subsided.

“It can’t be helped to forget yourself drinking alcohol after a battle. There’s no need to mind speech and conduct on occasions such as this.”

Mindful of the festive atmosphere and not wanting it disrupted, the Knight Commander excused Apollo’s behavior.

“Hearing that makes me glad.”

“Let us change the topic, however. What, in your opinion, had that queer, hard to deal with, and judicious with his complaints territory lord done for Bandeaux.”

The “queer” and, “hard to deal with” were Frederick’s impressions of Rion but Cassius and the others actually shared it.

“What had he done, eh?... So many things that a lifetime wouldn’t be enough to tell all about it.”

“That doesn’t tell us anything, you know. Come to think of it, didn’t I overhear just a moment ago something about Bandeaux having the best pleasure quarter of the east?”

“Hmm. If it’s just that, then it should be fine to talk about it.”

The particulars of Apollo’s story surprised those who knew Rion only from his time in the Academy. All they had seen back then had been Rion the Valet and they could hardly imagine him working as a governor now.

In fact, that idea never appeared in their minds.

“.....Added value. Is that how people call it?”

“There are those who call it distinguishing quality. However, our lord’s words are sometimes too complicated and hard to understand.”

“Mhm...”

The Knight Commander, a military man, could not fully get his head around those ideas. Nevertheless, Bandeaux had indeed been turned into a land people wanted to visit as was the case with the lord of this territory.

“If it’s only this much, then I can do it as well.”

Only Maria could blurt out something like this light-heartedly in this kind of a situation. She was, however, the person who understood what Rion had done the best.

“If it’s only what?”

“Service. Among other things. I also am aware that service too is important for a merchant to prosper. I think that, if a territory was left in my care, I would be able to do better than him.”

“A benefit of knowledge from the other world, huh?”

“That’s right. I know about all kinds of things that do not exist here. If I make use of that, I’m sure I will be able to achieve much.”

“Mhm.”

Maria was flustered and that was why she tried to market herself so hard. Not only had she accomplished nothing in this event, she had actually provided misleading information causing distress to the army command.

This should be the moment when the Kingdom recognized her worth but she had done nothing that merited recognition. And she was painfully self-aware of that.

“I want to hear a bit more about what sir Kiel said previously.”

“Yes, sir Frederick?”

Unfortunately for her, the knight commander was not interested in her self-aggrandizing stories. A different matter caught his attention and even if that wasn’t the case, territory management was outside his jurisdiction anyway.

“Why did you conduct this kind of surprise attack?”

“Why? Those were my orders.”

“I don’t dispute that but there was no guarantee you would find the enemy general after such a large circle around the battlefield. Didn’t that worry you?”

“Indeed, we had no way to predict that.”

“So, why risk it?”

“Because we were ordered to run if the target wasn’t there.”

“Ordered to run?”

“Yes. Lord Rion was convinced that the being manipulating the demons was in that horde but he did not have the confidence that it stationed itself in the rear.”

“Why?”

“He said that, although there were exceptions, demons, in general, do not coordinate their assaults. What’s more, in normal situations they do not employ feints. This horde did both of those things, therefore, according to my lord’s information, it must have been controlled.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, that’s not what I was asking about... But that’s still an interesting story. Continue, please.”

Frederick wanted to learn why Rion would consider adopting such a reckless strategy in the first place but the things Kiel was talking about were pretty interesting too.

“Even if you say that, I have not much to add. I was simply instructed that the most important objective of this battle was to eliminate whatever was controlling the horde, no matter its size.”

“...Is that the case?”

The Knight Commander asked Maria this time because she should know more than anyone about anything concerning the demons.

“It’s the devils. They are the ones controlling the demons.”

“I know that already. Will taking down a devil make the threat of a demon horde vanish or not?”

“That’s... I don’t think that’s the case...”

“Then why did Baron Frey think that such a feat alone would be enough?”

“It’s true that if the devils were to be vanquished, the demons will cease to be a threat.”

“I understand this is the big picture but what about a local case... Actually, nevermind.”

The knight commander deemed that talking about battlefield matters with Maria would likely go nowhere, so he dropped the subject.

“Let me go back to the original question. Why did Baron Frey decide on such a reckless strategy? I believe, no, I’m certain that he came here unwilling, didn’t he?”

Frederick turned back to the most burning question he hoped Kiel could answer.

“...I am not exactly certain myself. But I believe Lord Rion is just that kind of person.”

“That kind of person?”

“He does not trust others. The only possible exception to this, the only person he trusts in the truest sense, is the Baroness.”

“I see...”

It wasn’t hard for Frederick to think of reasons for Rion to turn out that way. The boy’s nature hadn’t been shaped just by the incident involving Vincent alone. There was his childhood in the slums as well. It was easy to imagine that kind of person valuing those rare individuals whom he came to trust very highly. And in Rion’s case, those individuals were Ariel and Vincent.

“However, while he does not trust, he does rely on others.”

“W-Wait a moment. How does that even work?”

“I can’t even begin to understand the peculiarities of this mindset but I have noticed two groups of people around him. I describe them as those in whom he has enough faith to rely on and those he has enough confidence in to make use of.”

“...I see. I think I can somehow understand.”

He would be willing to make use of you but he would never put his fate in your hands. This description encapsulated Rion's nature the best in Frederick's mind.

"Lord Rion highly values those whom he can believe in. This is the odd thing about him. He may dislike people, yet he still is extremely kind towards them."

"Extremely kind... It's to that extent, huh."

The knight commander had never witnessed the kindness that Rion had for others, so he couldn't quantify Kiel's words.

"Yes, to an even bigger extent than you can imagine. He has empathy for complete strangers that he doesn't even know, let alone trust. Once he became aware that the local villages were being assaulted by demons and understood the scale of the problem, he had resolved himself to save all of them."

"...But that was an impossible goal."

"It was. And so it had proven to be in the end. Nevertheless, even knowing that, Lord Rion would still not give up on those people."

"I see... So that was the reason behind that reckless way of fighting."

"We couldn't save all of those villages by our power alone. That's why our Baron resigned himself to not only rely on others but to even rely on those he wanted to stay away from the most."

"You are treading quite a fine line here, friend, you know that, right?"

Those Rion wanted to stay away from the most. That was obviously referring to the Crown Prince's circle. So even though Frederick understood the boy's feelings, his position still required him to issue a warning.

"It seems that I too had a slip of a tongue. My sincere apologies. It seems I do not have the right to tell people off tonight."

"To me it simply looks like the folk from Bandeaux is weak to liquor."

"We haven't taken part in any banquets for a long time, after all."

The Knight Commander excused the misstep by blaming it on the alcohol once more. Understanding those intentions, Kiel followed suit.

“There is a question I would like answered too.”

“Ah. Your highness. I...”

“Fret not. I would not condemn people over a festive table full of alcohol. Moreover, I’m not really in the position to tell people off either.”

Arnold still felt shame for not responding immediately to the unwilling hand of Rion that reached out to him. A gesture made for the sake of protecting the citizens.

“What would your highness like to hear about?”

“Something that piqued my curiosity earlier on. Why is Rion cold towards you all, his subordinates?”

“It is because we are disappointing.”

Kiel lied. He did now have some idea why Rion was cold towards the Bandeaux clan heads. But that real reason was not something to discuss publicly and definitely not in this company.

“Disappointing?”

“We never truly tried to do anything for the land where we grew up. That did not stop us from complaining loudly when he tried to change things, though. And that gall was something lord Rion has rightly scolded us for. Something he still remembers.”

“Even now?”

“Now? I, at the very least, don’t feel like I’m receiving cold treatment any longer. Those who still do feel that way have never really tried to face the Baron.”

“...Like they sit behind walls they raised on their own?”

“Yes, highness. That is a very apt way to put it. On top of the walls in our lord’s heart, they have built some of their own. It is no wonder they can’t see eye to eye.”

“I see.”

To get closer to Rion, one had to start by removing the barriers in his own heart. That was something that resonated with Arnold. His view of Rion had transformed from seeing him as someone who clad himself in the facade of a loyal retainer to obtain success over his former lord's grave to someone that could become an ally.

That change was prompted by what he saw during the battle and by the words of Kiel. The man called Rion who became a feudal lord so suddenly.

The Crown Prince Arnold now wanted to know more about him.

“Isn't he late? What were those outstanding matters that he had to take care of?”

Arnold had truly believed in the lie about small unresolved issues with the army after the battle.

“...I fear that lord Rion might not make it today, highness.”

Since trying to gloss over it would be bad, Kiel decided to tell the truth.

“Is that so?”

“He left the city. I do not know when will he come back.”

“...Where did he go?”

“...To the villages that were attacked by the demons. He said he intends to investigate their situation but I believe that to be an excuse.”

“Excuse? What for?”

There was a hint of irritation in Arnold's voice. He suspected the excuse was employed in order not to attend the celebration.

“...I believe his real goal is to apologize for the deaths of those he failed to save.”

Kiel said that with a bit of hesitation. After all, those words could be interpreted as criticism to all those who were present in this room. Nonetheless, there was, in his heart, a desire to do just that which was why he ultimately went ahead and said them.

“That’s...”

Sure enough, that had an impact on Arnold. But this kind of reaction was still a good one. Lancelot and Erwin, both sitting silent in the background, just let an ugly grimace creep onto their faces. Despite understanding the criticism, they did not reflect on it at all.

“It is just as I have said before. Lord Baron may hate people but he is kind to them nonetheless. And those two differing dispositions are irreversibly tangled in his heart.”

Kiel unknowingly hit the nail on the head with this description.

“Is that so...”

Seeing how the prince reacted, Kiel’s opinion of Arnold improved. The old man had guessed that the real reason why Rion and Ariel were treating the Bandeaux clans coldly was to keep them from getting involved in the pair’s designs. Designs that were likely connected to Arnold.

From what he had heard about Frey’s circumstances, it was clear that the two resented Arnold and all those in his coterie. And going against those people, the crown prince and the youth of the Marquess houses, meant going against the kingdom itself. That must have been what Rion and Ariel were trying to do. Furthermore, they were even preparing for failure.

That was why, thought Kiel, the two of them were trying to distance themselves from other people. They must have feared that if they got too involved, those people would end up getting caught along with them.

But even so, the head of Clan Blue still chose to follow the Freys. It was his way of repaying somebody that gave him a reason for living.



Rion, the unexpected main topic at the banquet in the lord of Harcourt’s mansion, was, just as Kiel suspected, going from one bereaved family to another to apologize.

He was also directing his soldiers to help with the burials and repairs of the ruined

villages.

But he received no gratitude for his efforts. The mourning, grief-stricken relatives and friends of the victims could only think of venting their anger. It didn't really matter who Rion was, or what was his responsibility for this situation. They needed a focus and an outlet so that their suffering would lessen, even if just a little bit.

Rion was not trying to offer any excuses, he accepted all the heckling and abuse with just more apology. After witnessing that scene repeated multiple times, Ariel, worried, called out to her husband.

"Don't you think this is enough?"

This was not a situation requiring Rion to come and apologize personally. She could no longer stand the sight of him getting more and more wounded and miserable like this.

"There's still a few places left to visit. You know I don't like to leave things half-done."

"But Rion is not the one at fault for this."

"...Am I really not?"

"Eh?"

"Is the fault truly not mine? A game event where the protagonist emerges victorious should not result in this many casualties."

Compared to what he knew of games, the results here brought too much tragedy. And it made him question himself.

"Even if that's true, this still does not make it Rion's fault."

"This may have been caused by a person totally unrelated to the story, me, getting involved."

"True. But that doesn't make it your fault either."

He did not participate in this conflict out of his own will. If all this misery was caused by Rion's participation, then the blame belonged to people that forced it. This was

what Ariel was trying to say. Unfortunately, she did not reach him.

“...Am I, after all, an existence that brings misfortune?”

“Rion!?”

This was the first time that Rion brought up the issue of his heterochromia in this way. That was just how much his spirit had suffered that day. Not from the villagers' heckles but from the sight of numerous victims that he had been faced with prior to that.

He might have experienced killing people before but this was the first time Rion had seen this many people be killed at once, people that died gruesome deaths. He couldn't shake off the dreaded fear that all this might have been caused by him.

All the feelings he had never dressed in words, the wounds in his heart from blaming himself for the death of Vincent, were reopened by this place.

This event had etched a deep shadow on Rion's heart. But the World paid it no mind. Unconcerned with his feelings, It was already preparing the next stage for him.

# Chapter 49

## The Poor Feudal Lord That Can't Catch A Breath

The demon subjugation was complete even if the outcome was unsatisfactory.

Since that was the case, Rion wanted to return home to his governmental duties in Bandeaux as soon as possible. Unfortunately, he was not allowed to do so and had to accompany the main army to the capital to submit a report on the operation.

This was, usually, not something a simple backwater lord like him need to do but all attempts to argue based on this fact were rejected by the Knight Commander. Moreover, he was harshly rebuked by trying to argue he was not the best-suited person for the task.

The scolding was justified. Rion was, without a doubt, the person that knew best what had happened during this mission, therefore he was not really being ordered to come without a good reason.

And thus the royal army and the clansmen departed towards the capital together.

They had traversed half of the distance already, yet Rion was still as displeased as he had been on the first day, riding on his horse with arms crossed and an ever-present cloud on his face. His bad mood was so obvious that others marveled at the fact that his horse was still moving onwards without breaking ranks.

Ariel was the only person present that could penetrate his attitude and make him talk. He would occasionally speak to others, though. Those people, his subordinates, tended to appear out of nowhere and disappear as suddenly.

This eventually piqued the interest of the people around but Rion paid that no mind.

“Trading post expansion?... Tricky. There is a need for now but the flow of goods will wane when the demons are dealt with. The land might be better employed for other purposes.”

This was one more of those moments when Rion was conferring with those

mysterious subordinates. All of them, including this one, belonged to Clan Black and their mission had changed from scouting to relaying information between him and the territory.

“Instructions Lord?”

“Ask Folz first. If he wants to expand, give him priority.”

“If not?”

“Accept whomever. Announce we will lend the land free of charge to all who wish to do business in Camargue.”

“Free of charge, lord?”

The question was natural, even for someone with no experience in business like this clansman.

“Make them draw a contract. If they fail to reach a sales target within a prescribed time, they can pay normal rate, by taking a loan from us if necessary, or leave.”

“May I have detailed explanation, lord?”

“What for?”

“Lord’s intentions are likely to be unclear to some, they will blame me for that.”

“...Point.”

Rion could understand this worry. He was not very fond of explaining things to people because his train of thought was slightly odd for this world’s standards and he struggled to find words to get his ideas across. But there were people, like Jan and other alumni, who would not willingly obey without being able to understand the point first and they didn’t care much for his dislikes in this area.

“The aim is to lower the barrier to entry for the new businesses. You know that there are people with worthwhile merchandise that simply lack capital to do business in other towns, right?”

“Yes, lord.”

“We want them. But they also have to earn their preferential treatment, which is why there is to be a trial period in the contract. Do you understand now?”

“Yes. Thank you, lord.”

“Investigate them first, of course. Your clan’s job, I presume?”

“The Head will know, lord.”

Rion’s request would be delivered to Bravd to act on.

“Once that is done, if the animal husbandry is going well, have them consider setting up a cattle market. It doesn’t matter if some of the expansion is used.”

“Understood, lord.”

“Hmm... Are you going to be fine with all this? None of this is secret, you are allowed paper.”

“Unnecessary worry, lord.”

All members of the Clan Black, even the inexperienced ones, were raised as spies from a very young age. Bravd would be very angry if they failed to memorize this amount of information.

“I see. Moving on, then. Regeneration of the residential area is to proceed.”

“Yes, lord.”

“At a leisurely pace, though. The demand for more is uncertain right now.”

“...Understood, lord.”

The messenger judged that it would be better not to ask about the intention behind this. He could see it was not a matter big enough to warrant concern.

“All for today. Keep up the good work. Take care on your way back.”

“By your command!”

This scene played out numerous times for several days making even the clansmen surprised at their baron's diligence. After all, Cassius and the other heads excluded, none of them saw Rion at work before.

And they weren't the only ones impressed.

"You are really dedicated to your work as a lord, are you not?"

"Hmm?"

This was the first time that someone other than Ariel called out to Rion ever since they had left Harcourt. He was surprised as he was consciously carrying himself in a way to deter others from that.

"Ah, so it is lady Charlotte. Is there something my lady requires?"

This kind of reply from Rion was a relief for Charlotte. It wasn't really proper for her to go and try to strike a conversation out of the blue and on top of that he looked as badly disposed towards talking with people as was humanly possible.

Her outwardly nonchalant question had actually taken quite a lot of courage.

"Not really, it is just that..."

"...My lady is bored again and would like my company like in the past?"

"Ah, I did do that kind of thing, did I not?"

Rion's word made her recall the time in the old castle when they suffered the first demon attack. Back then, for a lack of a conversation partner, she had chosen to accompany Rion to relieve boredom.

"Yes my lady, that did happen. Is it happening again, perhaps?"

"In part... But, before we continue..."

Charlotte tried to gather all her courage once more. Her gaze wandered past Rion to Ariel riding her horse on his other side.

"...There are apologies that have to be made."

She addressed her erstwhile rival feeling she had to apologize.

“That is unnecessary.”

“Nevertheless...”

“It seems I was misunderstood. It is unnecessary because I will not forgive Charlotte even if she does apologize.”

Ariel’s reply was harsh. It was not meant for Charlotte alone either. Accepting that gesture now would make her obliged to accept the same when approached by others, she did not want that to happen.

“...I am terribly sorry for what I have done nonetheless.”

“We are going nowhere with this. Just carry on with your previous conversation.”

“...Alright.”

Charlotte was rejected, in the end, but not completely. She could not get a grasp on what Ariel was thinking, it was certain, though, that she was just allowed to stay in their company.

“Hmm... Where should I start? I have so many things to ask that I just do not know which one should be first.”

“Oh, that many, my lady?”

“Naturally. Your recent undertakings were a source of never-ending surprises.”

“Hmm... And yet I do not recall doing anything to surprise my lady?”

“...Call me Charlotte, please.”

“Ah?”

“You are a Baron and I am just a daughter of a Marquess with no peerage of my own, is that not a good enough reason?”

“Is that so, my lady?”

“I-It’s not like that at all. I honestly didn’t mean anything more by this.”

“Eh?”

Rion was bewildered by this unexpectedly irrational and flustered reply.

“Ah, I was talking to your wife just now...”

Prompted by Charlotte’s words, Rion’s gaze turned towards where Ariel was and what he saw there was his wife glaring at the other girl with icy stare.

“What just...?”

“...Did something occur between this woman and Rion in the past?”

“What do you mean?”

“A dalliance.”

“A dalliance? As if something like that would happen.”

“...I see, then, it must be that.”

“That?”

“Nothing important. Do continue your conversation.”

“...Okay.”

Ariel had made a decision long time ago, she would not care about other women’s feelings for Rion as long as he didn’t hold any interest in them in turn. This was the only way not to live in a constant state of jealousy while he had been sleeping, against himself, with so many women for the sake of her future and that of Vincent.

“So what should we talk about, my lady?”

“Your way of addressing me, for a start.”

“Ah, right. I just cannot help feeling reluctant to talk to my lady in such an intimate manner, it seems presumptuous. That being the case, can we compromise with “Miss

Charlotte”?”

“Alright. That’s a start.”

“Well then, what would miss Charlotte like to talk about?”

“How surprisingly casual.”

“Eh?”

“You do seem to be in quite the bad mood, you know. Frankly, attempting to approach you right now is quite frightening.”

“It is true that I am in quite a foul mood. I have too many things on my mind, a lot of them rather irritating.”

“Such as?”

“Matters of the fief mostly. It was in a sorry state when I arrived there and there is still much to do.”

“And that has been on your mind all this time?”

“It has. When the people are in front of you, it is possible to direct them with a single word. That can not be done once you, or they, leave somewhere. There are ongoing matters requiring my oversight, matters requiring backup plans in case problems happen. Each of them carries many possibilities and my mind is already full.”

Whenever Rion issued instructions, it would take the messenger roughly a month to come back with a report about the outcome. This kind of delay made progress difficult, so Rion had to start considering potential scenarios and contingencies for each of the cases.

“...So you have to issue instructions this detailed?”

Charlotte herself knew nothing about governing but she never really had the impression that her father was under the same pressure as Rion. And that was largely correct, not because Lord Marquess Fatillas was lazy. The demands of governing a territory as large as his simply forced him to delegate majority of the burden to trusted retainers.

“I have to admit, miss Charlotte, I have never thought feudal lords had this much authority until I became one.”

The feudal lord of the land was someone that held the highest authority in that place. This was as true in the fief of Charlotte’s father as it was in Bandeaux.

“Could you not just leave this to your subordinates?”

“I am burdening them enough as things stand. Moreover, some of the people I rely on currently are not legally my retainers, they cannot proceed with the work without my consent.”

“Not your retainers?”

“Acquaintances from the Academy days. Miss Charlotte might know them better as lord Vincent’s former tutors.”

“Ah...”

It was still hard for Charlotte to hear Vincent mentioned. Doubly so when it came from Rion himself. All her mistakes would flood back from the depths of her memory and sit heavy on her chest.

“Those people are lending their hand to me. This is just assistance, though, not an oath of fealty.”

Rion continued talking without reacting to Charlotte’s distress. She couldn’t decide whether that was due to his coldness or his kindness.

“Do you have no retainers under you?”

“I do, formally at least. I am a feudal lord, after all.”

“...What do you mean by that?”

“A retainer is someone like I was for Vincent. There is no one in my land that treats me like I had treated my lord.”

“...Oh Rion. That is so harsh on your subordinates.”

Charlotte honestly thought there would never be another master-to-servant relationship like the one Rion and Vincent shared. Theirs was unique, absolutely one of a kind. If that was what he expected from his subordinates, then it was way too high a standard.

“Even if miss Charlotte says that, this is the only way I know.”

“Now that you told me this, I am starting to feel sorry for those behind us. No other person in this world, beside you, is capable of giving everything he is and has for the lord he serves, you do know that, right?”

“Yes, I am aware of that. Which is exactly why I am not expecting anything of anybody.”

“...Do you not find that to be bad too?”

Rion saying that he did not expect anything was really harsh on his retainers too and it did, in fact, make Kiel feel sad. To all others eavesdropping on this conversation out of curiosity Rion’s former lord suddenly grew in stature to mythical proportions.

“Hey, I have a question.”

This voice did not belong to Charlotte. Rion, Ariel and her all simultaneously showed displeasure hearing it. A certain impudent woman, seeing Charlotte’s conversation going well, decided to employ her usual brazen approach and butt in.

“What kind of magic was that?”

Rion remained silent, ignoring Maria’s question. He did not even deign to look at her and neither did Ariel. They completely erased the approaching girl from their consciousness.

“Hello? Can you hear me? You should reply when asked, you know.”

But even when she worded it like that, Rion could not reply. Actually, she should be grateful that he did not answer her with a blade and magic. Thankful to the World that is.

“Hey? Isn’t ignoring people like this rude?”

“Aren’t you the impertinent person here?”

Kiel, judging from Rion and the other's behavior that Maria was not a desirable person, decided to intervene and respond to her.

"What? I'm Maria, you know?"

"A commoner, I presume?"

Kiel's assumption was reasonable. Having no surname in this world was the proof of having no status. Not all commoners lacked a family name, some were granted the privilege in recognition of exemplary achievements. There was nobody, however, that would avoid stating their surname when introducing themselves. Having one in this world carried that much prestige.

"You're wrong. I come from the family of a baronet."

Maria, still having no idea or interest in matters of etiquette, was just casually introducing herself like she had been in the previous world. She used to have a tendency to use her former name as well but because it was not anything like "Maria" she had corrected that particular habit.

"A quasi-noble then. Hmph, to think someone like you would dare to call out a landed noble for impoliteness. Who do you think was the impertinent one here?"

"Impertinent?"

"A commoner that offends someone of noble status commits a transgression. Don't tell me that you don't know that?"

"But I'm Rion-kun's friend, you know?"

"This cannot possibly be true. Lord baron clearly loathes the idea of talking to you."

"That's..."

"Get lost, girl. I am a loyal servant of my lord, I will have no more of this nonsense."

Kiel called himself Rion's servant out of pure stubbornness. He had determined himself to make Rion recognize him as a proper retainer one day in the future.

"...Fine."

Maria obediently retreated from before the old man that just didn't seem to get it. She might have cared little for the feelings of others but she could recognize that she was being hated for putting Rion and Ariel through so much and that stubbornly trying to continue here would achieve nothing.

Incidentally, Maria's antics cost Arnold the chance to have conversation with Rion and Ariel and made it clear that to him that none of them had been forgiven.

"I wonder why that woman is so very shameless."

Charlotte, still annoyed, spoke her mind right after Maria left.

"She thinks that the lead character will be forgiven for anything she has done."

"...You sure have a way with words. But I guess that it is true that that woman is of a type that will not rest until she gets to play the leading role. Even though she is completely unsuited for that."

Charlotte could insult Maria without restraints in the present company and the feelings she had always been forced to hold back exploded from her in an unending stream of scorn and derision.

"Did I hear right? Miss Charlotte thinks it doesn't suit her?"

"Yes, that is exactly what I think. For me, the best leaders are those that naturally gather other people's attention. Not those that have to constantly expend effort to forcibly grab it like her."

"...Is that so..."

Rion knew for a fact that Maria was in a leading role which is why Charlotte's words were a huge surprise. Charlotte, one of the most crucial characters in Maria's team, was openly saying that the her supposed leader was unsuited for the task.

The game scenario might have been developing much worse than Rion expected.

"...Eh, you are still as dense as always."

Of course, Charlotte couldn't possibly know what was on Rion's mind. She just thought his reaction was par for the course.

“Eh?”

“I was talking about you right now, you know?”

“Me?”

“All the things you do always gather people’s attention. And once you have it, they can neither take their eyes from you nor stop listening to your words.”

“Ah, but I don’t want that at all. That would be bad for me.”

“That may be so. But that will not change even if you hate it. It was certainly true in the recent conflict. Even I, someone who hates fighting even when the opponents are demons, felt shivers from watching you in battle. Shivers of admiration rather than fear.”

“That’s... Flattery won’t get you anything from me, you know?”

“Is that so? A shame.”

Even though Charlotte laughed it off as a joke, in the end, those were her honest feelings. And not hers alone.

# Chapter 50

## A Proven Capability

Finally the day to make a report from the victory came. Fortunately for Rion, the meeting was low-key and looked like a normal conference.

That said, the participants were rather extraordinary. The meeting was chaired by the King at the head of the table. The chairs on his left were taken by Arnold, the Knight Commander and Lancelot in that order. Rion and Ariel were also seated on that side at a rather uncomfortable spot near Maria.

In short, the seats on this side were for those who participated in the subjugation, with Rion being seated at the foot of the table in recognition of his merits.

In front of him, on the King's right side, sat the government officials – The Prime Minister, the Royal Minister of War, the Marshal of the Crown, the Royal Wizard as well as their adjutants. This kind of lineup was something that Rion, a mere baron, would usually never get to see.

Which he frankly did not care about, since he had never wanted to come here in the first place.

“The main issue this time was an incorrect estimate of the enemy numbers. The failure to recognize the diversion was a secondary problem.”

The knight commander did all the presentation so far. With that being the case, there seemed to be no need for Rion to be here but he refrained from raising that subject again because he would hate to be told to take over.

“Is the extent of the casualties known?”

The main part of the presentation was concluded, so, the King started to ask questions.

“Precise calculations are yet to be completed, sire, the early estimations come at ten thousand.”

“That many, huh...”

It was the first time ever since the demon attacks had started the kingdom suffered this much. This information caused the King to frown deeply.

“My deepest apologies, majesty. This was an avoidable failure and our fault.”

“Avoidable? How?”

“We focused on defending Harcourt too much and concentrated all our forces there. This left the neighboring settlements practically defenseless and unable to offer any resistance to demon assault.”

“Wouldn’t Harcourt end up suffering if you had not done so?”

“This is why the wrong estimate of enemy numbers is the primary problem, sire. Had we had the correct intelligence and dispatched enough soldiers from the capital, the outcome would be very different.”

“Is that so...”

The King stared at Maria causing her to drop her eyes to the floor and shrink under his reproachful gaze. She was undeniably at fault. Fearing she would not be able to contribute much if the army was large, she acted to make the number of dispatched troops as small as possible.

But of course, the greater responsibility lied with those that accepted her suggestions. She had no knowledge of military matters beyond that what featured in the game, treating her ideas seriously was the wrong thing to do.

“Now that we know this, the problem is how should we proceed.”

Frederick was aware of all that. She might have come from the other world but they still had been foolish to trust her words uncritically. Still, he thought that scolding her would achieve nothing and it was more important to figure out what to do from now on.

“Where will the next attack happen?”

Guessing the Knight Commander’s intentions, the King softened his stare a little and

asked Maria for the next target.

“Ah, yes. It will be Nyegert.”

“North-east this time, huh. When? “

“In roughly two months.”

“I see. Not that far off, huh. In light of this failure, we think doubling of previous demon estimate is in order.”

“This may not be sufficient, sire.”

“Is doubling not enough?”

“That is my belief, sire. What is Lord Marshal’s opinion?”

The kingdom’s armies were in fact deployed and moved by the Marshal of the Crown. And Frederick decided to leave the planning in his hands this time.

“I concur. It was wrong to base the number of soldiers on the number of demons in the first place.”

“How should we proceed then?”

“Majesty, we should start by calculating the number of soldiers required to defend the city. Look at this please.”

Prompted by that remark, the Marshal’s adjutant spread some papers on the table. There, on two separate sheets, was a map of the Nyegert area and a plan of the city.

“Going by the size of the city, the number of soldiers required to hold it is three thousand. Considering the need for rotation and such, four thousand should suffice.”

Having a large number of troops didn’t really translate to having a tougher defense. There was a limited number of posts on the fortifications that needed to be manned and they could only hold so many soldiers. Any more would just become surplus to requirements.

“Is that not what we have done the previous time?”

“While four thousand mentioned will focus on defending, we will arrange for a mobile unit as well.”

“Hmm, last time we were unable to maneuver even knowing we faced a diversion.”

“Yes, sire. Now the problem lies in the scope of the area. On this map, I have marked the settlements around Nyegert, the numbers represent their known population.”

“What do we need that for?”

The King couldn’t understand just from looking at the markings on the map, he was not really that gifted when it came to military affairs.

“We will start by ordering all those places to evacuate. Not all of those people will fit into Nyegert, so we will move some to the second biggest town. Based on its location we identified three perfect places to intercept any hostile force moving there, we plan to station two thousand troops in each of them.”

“We see. And they are going to merge into one force if two thousand is an insufficient force?”

“Yes, majesty. Even if they take their time regrouping, there will be no casualties since all the small towns will be empty.”

“Mhm. Not bad.”

The king seemed to be satisfied with the Marshal’s plan.

“Now then, with this vision as the basis of our plans, let us formulate a detailed strategy.”

The conference might have been called to prepare for the upcoming demon assault but Maria’s participation this time was limited to announcing the next target attacked. Once that was done, the Marshal and the Knight Commander took over completely to work out a plan.

On the previous occasion, the kingdom had considered the demons to be a threat on the scale of everyday harassment by demonic beasts, if somewhat wider in scope. This time, however, there was no more of this kind of naivety. They recognized they were at war and that meant planning the response was the job of the military personnel.

Nevertheless, there was a person that disagreed with the strategic approach adopted by the Knight Commander and Crown Marshal.

“Baron Frey.”

“...”

“Baron Frey!”

“...Ah, yes?”

Lightly poked by Ariel next to him, Rion finally noticed the Knight Commander had been calling him.

“If you have thoughts on this matter, we would hear them.”

“Sir Frederick!? I believe there’s no need to ask amateurs for an opinion!”

The Crown Marshal objected immediately. Even he agreed that the previous failure was caused by giving undue weight to Maria’s suggestions.

“Baron Frey’s achievements in the previous campaign were unmatched. Shouldn’t we at least hear his opinion?”

“I do not dispute that, however...”

“Just because we hear what he says does not mean our plans need to change. If there is no merit to his argument, we shall proceed as before. Which is not unlikely to happen in my opinion.”

“...Very well. Let the man speak his piece.”

Most people present did not expect Rion to say anything that would make them change the current strategy, so the Marshal eventually agreed.

“You heard us. Speak your mind.”

“Even if you tell me that...”

“Do you really have no ideas of your own?”

The Knight Commander had been keeping Rion in his sight all through the conference. He had noticed that he had seemed to be lost in thought ever since the Crown Marshal's map were spread on the table.

"...Haah. Alright, let me start with a question to the person sitting next to me."

"Eh? Me?"

Maria turned to Rion surprised by the sudden turn of events.

"Who else? If I wanted to ask Ariel, there would be no need to notify others."

Rion retorted without even looking at Maria, not even taking part in this conference would make him change his attitude to her.

"...Your question?"

"Are the demons, or should I say the devils, attacking Nyegert going to use magic?"

"...Yes, they are."

"What!?"

This was a surprise only for the other participants of the conference, none of them even considered it possible for the demons to have the ability to employ magic.

"As everyone can see, the defense arrangements for Nyegert need reviewing. Ask this person for details on expected hostile magic later."

"...Alright."

The existing plans would have to undergo huge changes depending on the presence and type of hostile magic. The worst case scenario would mean they could not passively remain within the city fortifications and just focus on defending the outer walls.

Just one question from Rion's lips had thrown the strategy into disarray. Frederick's intuition was spot on, moreover, he wouldn't allow the young baron to get away with just that.

“What else?”

“Eh?”

“The map you spent all this time glaring at was the one of the wider area, not the city plan. Your big idea cannot be related to presence of magic during the siege.”

“...*Crafty old bastard.*”

“What was that!?”

Rion had purposefully muttered loud enough to be heard by Frederick. He had not a shred of respectful obedience towards the man and was still bitter about being so one-sidedly beaten by him in the past.

“I said, we could just attack them.”

“We could what?”

“We should stop just waiting for the demons to attack us and just go after them ourselves. That’s what I think.”

“If that was possible we would not be forced to bear with all this.”

“I can’t see why it couldn’t be done, though?”

“How? We cannot even figure out where they are going to attack from, you know?”

“Why is that? “

“Are you not the one who reported that they are using transportation magic?”

This question too made people present somewhat surprised. Most of them did not know this piece of information came from Rion.

“Certainly, but why can’t we just figure out where they will transfer to?”

“Wha.....?”

“You really need more explanations? Nobody ever managed to observe one of those

summoning places but they are certain to have a magical circle. You know that, right?"

While clearly showing that he was bothered by having to explain this, Rion was nevertheless stingy with words.

"Just explain yourself properly already, boy!"

"...At least try to use that head of yours."

Again, Rion deliberately complained loud enough for Frederick to hear. However, this time, the Knight Commander wasn't angry. He was more interested in what Rion was trying to say.

"Fine already, just explain properly."

"Maaan... The magical circles will be placed in locations that are uninhabited and avoided by people."

"...Ah, so that's what you're at."

Just hearing that was enough to make Rion's point obvious. It was true they didn't know where would the demons come from. The transportation spell that moved them around did, however, require a magic circle to be placed ahead of time. And those would have to be prepared somewhere no one would look at.

"So we are looking for a place in the vicinity of Nyegert uninhabited and far from the road network. Most likely within a forest or inside a mountain range."

"And if we can pinpoint those locations..."

Even if the citizens are evacuated, it would still take time for the cities and villages attacked by the demons to recover. That period would be very harsh on affected people ultimately damaging the strength of the nation.

All the government ministers present wanted to protect the land if it could be done.

"That is impossible. There are too many places fitting that description. Just how many soldiers do you want to invest into this search?"

The Crown Marshal disagreed with the plan and he was not wrong doing so. Rules of

strategy dictated that dispersing one's army too much was a mistake, not to mention the outrageous manpower such a search operation demanded.

"So says Lord Marshal of the Crown, do you disagree?"

The Knight Commander, asking that question, believed that Rion had something in mind for that problem. He was not the type to say so much without thinking it through to the end.

"Before I address this, I want to know the sizes of the magical circles that have been found until now."

And sure enough, Rion did have something in mind.

"Size of the magical circles?"

"I believe the ones our enemies are using are disposable. If they are not going to be used multiple times, won't we be able to figure out how many demons can be sent at once from the size of the used up magical circles found?"

"...Your excellency?"

The question was addressed to the Royal Wizard who had kept silent all this time.

"All found of the same size. Hypothesis : one variety only."

"...Can multiple ones not be placed together? That would multiply the capacity."

"Analysis not complete. Hypothesis : huge variety of mana required. Hypothesis : all mana in the circle's area absorbed by the spell."

"So your excellency is saying that those things are not something that can be used numerous times?"

The Royal Wizard, like Rion was a man of few words. Some people turn eccentric knowing their minds work different from the norm and he was one of those.

"Hypothesis : likely."

"Is that so. How did you notice that, boy?"

Frederick returned his attention to Rion again.

“How? I just discovered it now myself”

“...This damned brat.”

This couldn't possibly be the case. Frederick was certain that Rion said finding the locations was doable knowing about the magical circles from the start.

In fact it didn't have to be Rion, anyone able to use magic would know this. However, that person would have to inspect a magical circle not long after activation. Doing that would lead to the discovery that all mana in the area, spirits to Rion, was in a complete disarray.

Those magical circles were inhumane magic that so forcefully absorbed the mana-spirits around them that whatever remained was damaged.

“Thanks to sir Wizard's information we now know we can find and accurately estimate the number of enemies about to invade the area. This lets us send adequate number of soldiers in response. The next step is to find their likely gathering points of the horde and hit those in rapid succession. That's about it for the plan.”

If all this was accomplished, the damage suffered to the civilian infrastructure would be smaller than in the plan outlined by the Crown Marshal. On the whole Rion's words not only affected the plan, they provoked its complete overhaul.

“...We think this is not an opinion that can be ignored.”

With the Knight Commander staying silent the King took the reins of the conversation and the conference.

“It is still based on pure speculation that the demons will come from many different places at once.”

The Crown Marshal, looking like he had discarded his own plan, started pointing out the flaws of Rion's strategy.

“True. But the assumption is believable. And it would be a shame to abandon those villages just to reduce commoner casualties.”

With this supportive comment from Frederick everyone in the room knew that the previous plan was now abandoned. That was exactly why the King had to lead this transition himself.

“We wonder, can our armies not do both of the things proposed in parallel?”

“Sire, is it really fine to just concentrate on the Nyegert, though? There are various other places suffering from the demon attacks as well.”

“Surely there is no need to worry about this. Can we not leave things in the hands of the local militia?”

“Of course, sire. However, the territorial armies are rather small and will be of little help in many places.”

“Then we shall have the Marquess retinues act instead.”

In some of the vassal fiefs of the Crown the local militia was so small it couldn't even be called an army. A big body of troops required a comparably sizeable budget, something that wasn't really a priority for the landed nobles away from the borders of the kingdom. That was just a reality of life.

On the other hand, the mighty Marquess houses had retinues as extravagant as their equally sizeable treasuries allowed. So big in fact, that it made the central government suspicious of their actual purpose.

“...Those are already deployed, sire. However, their actions so far are restricted to things that benefit their patrons.”

“...We see.”

The Marquess Houses, even now, acted only for their own selfish interests. That was painful to hear for Lancelot and the others belonging to those houses.

“In light of that fact, sire, should the Royal Guard be dispatched?”

If the Chivalric Order of the Kingdom was tied down with defensive duties then another military formation of that calibre was required. However, deploying the Royal Guard was a serious matter as it was technically the private army of the royals.

“I guess we have no choice. Prime Minister, what is our schedule for today?”

The King, thinking he should dispatch his own army personally, wanted to verify his plans for the day but he was interrupted.

“There is no need for that, sire. This Royal Guard deployment will be led by Baron Frey.”

“W-What!?”

By saying this Frederick surprised absolutely everyone, if for different reasons. The people not aware of the secret behind Rion’s origins found the idea of Royal Guard being led by a mere Baron abnormal. The King, however, could not comprehend what the Knight Commander was aiming at by hinting at Rion’s true, top secret background so strongly.

“While I did say Royal Guard, I meant to use squires and apprentices. They do not represent enough war potential to warrant sire’s personal involvement and should not have a significant impact on our existing plans.”

“...Is that not simply throwing their lives away before they are ready for combat?”

“They may be squires, sire, but I have trained all of them with my own hands. They do have considerable combat skills already.”

“Individual combat skills, perhaps, but that is never eno...”

“An experienced officer will be attached to oversee them. I believe Sol Aristes is free at the moment”

“Frederick?”

This confused both of the royal family members present so much, they simultaneously called him by his name like when they were children.

And others that had knowledge of what went on in the capital understood why. Sol was a very important figure in the ranks of the Guard.

“With this I believe both plans are finalized.”

The Knight Commander continued talking ignoring the outburst of the monarch.

“...I have never said I agree to do this.”

“Nobody asked, boy. This is a royal order, you will comply.”

“I hate your guts, old man!”

“Like you have the right to say that? If I have not asked for your opinion, you would never have volunteered your plan, right?”

“Only because I heard that the comments of a mere beginner are unnecessary.”

This jab was aimed at the Marshal of the Crown.

“And I am sure the small detail of demon’s magic abilities would be no different. What do you think would happen if we continued to plan without knowing about that?”

“Nothing. The heroes of the kingdom would surely make up for the flaws in the defensive strategy.”

And this jab was aimed at Maria’s group.

“...You might have have been charming when you were a child valet but now all that is left in that body is just a grumpy old man, huh?”

“O-Old man? I am not old.”

“I am talking about your mental age, not appearance, boy.”

“...Ariel?”

As Rion bickered with, and started to be bothered by Frederick he heard Ariel giggling beside him.

“Not the best place to laugh, my dearest husband?”

This made Rion sulk. And that, in turn, made Ariel pinch his face wide.

“...I-It hurts. W-why?”

“Hearing Rion described as a valet made me feel nostalgic.”

“D-Do people, p-pinch other’s, f-face when they feel nostalgic?”

“Oh details, I used to do that back then all the time.”

“...B-But we’re c-currently at a v-very important c-conference.”

“And I am bored.”

Seeing them being like this was not just adorable but pleasant to the eyes. For all those people that did not have Rion’s trust, he suddenly started to look like a different person from before.

“Can you stop that already? It is nice to see there are no problems in your marriage but we are trying to have a serious discussion here.”

“What, are you envious, old man?”

“E-Envious?”

“To think that you would feel envy towards a couple that could have been your grandchildren. You are actually pretty young at heart after all, keep it up.”

“T-This stupid brat!!”

It was still too early to say that Frederick had opened to Rion. What could be definitely seen, though, was that the strict Knight Commander was allowing his feelings to show in the matters regarding the boy. Which made all that had known the old man doubt their eyes.

“...While seeing spectacles like this one is heartening, we are in fact quite busy. Baron Frey, as sir Frederick just said you are hereby given a royal order to lead our Guard to subjugate the demon threat.”

“...Understood, majesty.”

“Sir Frederick, we shall leave final details of the defense around Nyegert in your capable hands. You are to proceed without worrying about the good Baron’s plans.”

“Yes, sire.”

The royal approval of the plans was granted. With this nobody had any grounds for complaint left and they would now had to do as ordered. Especially Rion who suddenly found himself at the head of an army and was facing a very busy future.

He left the conference immediately, fully aware of what was in store for him. And honestly, he didn't want to stay there for one second longer than necessary anyhow.

Others departed not long after, they had no more reasons to linger even if, like Maria, they were not really happy with the outcome.

The only people left in the room were the King and the Knight Commander.

“So, what are you up to?”

It wasn't exactly a coincidence, the monarch wanted to pick his Knight Commander's mind.

“I just thought it would be too much of a waste to leave his talent in obscurity.”

“...Does he have that much of it?”

“Maybe? By all rights he should be an amateur at strategy. Yet he came up with this.”

“It will be trouble if he ends up in the spotlight.”

The King was not worried about Rion's military talent but about the charisma that instantly took control of the meeting with nearly a single word. And rendered the Crown Prince nearly invisible and his presence in the meeting mostly irrelevant.

“Yes, but if he becomes a royal guard...”

“What?”

“I figured this may be a way of repairing their relationship, especially if we can groom him to lead the Royal Guard in the future.”

“So you see him as retainer. Why Sol, though?”

“Having his talents rot is an even bigger waste.”

“Is it wise given he will not be told the truth?”

“...Honestly, this is a gamble. But it does not stop me from having that silly hope he will figure out the truth anyway.”

“Is that so...”

Sol Aristes was the Royal Guard chosen to personally protect the second child of the royal couple. The unlucky princess that had been suddenly kidnapped on the day of her birth and vanished from the face of the earth.

Despite that Sir Aristes had remained abnormally loyal towards the princess he had never met and refused all offers to guard future royal children instead. Even now he had been waiting for the missing princess to be found.

This made him a knight who should’ve been Rion’s royal guard from birth. And even the Knight Commander who arranged them to meet again did not know what would come from this.

# Chapter 51

## The Worst Possible First Impression

Rion may have been very dissatisfied with himself for falling into Knight Commander's verbal trap but he was not the only person unhappy with how the conference went. Maria took being treated like an outsider even worse.

She was the protagonist, shouldn't she be the one dictating the strategy? That said, there was no such meeting among the game's cutscenes. Once the player pressed the button to continue he would immediately be confronted by the battle with the demons. The game might have called this part "the strategy arc" but, in reality, there was no strategy to be had at all, just a chain of battle events for the protagonist to overcome in sequence.

It was not, however, enough to simply emerge victorious, the player was awarded "war points" for their performance in the battle.

Those points, together with points for clearing non-combat events in the Academy and afterward, would add up to her final popularity score in the game.

Maria, for this reason, considered the battles important events she could not neglect, even if her primary motivation was only the significant amount of points that could be gained.

Becoming the Queen and marrying Arnold depended on her clearing a fixed popularity target. The game scenario decreed that only by gaining an overwhelming popularity with the masses and using that as leverage could the commoner Maria ascend to the throne.

Despite that, she ended up having no outstanding achievements of note recently. Moreover, she had even provided misleading information making her lose the trust of the King and other government figures. If this situation was to persist, becoming the Queen would prove impossible.

And, when she was hoping to turn the situation around, Rion had stolen her chance to do so.

Rion. The character that should have disappeared after the Royal Academy arc, one now returned to the main stage. The character that had never appeared in the game Maria knew, now standing as her rival in the strategy arc. This flustered her greatly.

Maria had no idea what to do. His absence from the game robbed her of clues about what things they would contest and what to do to win against him.

(This is bad. It feels as though I have stepped on a landmine. What should I do?)

She was still not aware who Rion actually was, she just thought this was a consequence of provoking a rare character.

(...I need a win in the next event. I guess I have to make him fail to get it.)

She knew that strategy for the next battle was to have Rion fight on the front lines again and that would make him take all the achievements again leaving none for her.

(But how?)

She decided to make him fail but achieving that was no simple matter. Maria had no influence whatsoever on the Knight Commander. She could find no way to interfere from that angle, so she could formulate no plan to do so.

(I guess I'll have to use Arnold again. I have to somehow make him hinder Rion.)

She needed someone with influence over Frederick and the only person she could turn to was the Crown Prince. Thus she decided to rely on Arnold.

She never expected this would end up causing her even more anxiety in the future



Rion was busy after arriving in the capital, even more so than usual, in fact. Still, there were people he needed to meet, people that were really looking forward to seeing him in the city – the citizens of the slum.

“You want to transform the business into a high-class brothel?”

“Yes boss. I was thinking that it’s about time to make some changes.”

Ain was visibly happy, while he was making his report. It had been quite a while from the last time he had a chance to talk with Rion face-to-face.

“...Is there a need<sup>[1]</sup>?”

“Ni-what?”

“Hmm, the concept of demand will probably be too difficult... I was asking if there are customers who request that sort of thing.”

“Ah, yes, there are.”

“Enough of them that it would bring profits? Moving upscale requires a significant investment. There is no point if all additional income from higher prices will be eaten by new expenses. And skimping on costs will get us nowhere, a half-assed high-class brothel won’t get any customers.”

“...That’s true.”

“But it’s true that we need some kind of change. Maybe, for the time being, we should start by giving rank<sup>[2]</sup> to prostitutes?”

“Rank<sup>[3]</sup>... Ah, is that about a hierarchy?”

“Yeah. That might be rude to the girls but we should change the prices of their services according to their appearance and skills.”

“Aren’t we already doing that, though?”

“We can take the idea further. Make the rooms they use change according to the ranks too. And... Yeah, there’s also that. We can start having Oirans<sup>[4]</sup>.”

Rion was thinking about the red light districts that he saw in the historical dramas. He figured that he could try and copy them in their entirety using that formula as a blueprint for success in this world.

“Uhh?...”

“The highest grade of prostitutes. We cannot half-ass that either. Employ one or two of those and make it hard to gain their service.”

“Eh? How? What should she do?”

“Let’s see... The first interaction with the customer should be a conversation. If the Oiran likes the customer enough, she’ll offer to serve him drink the next time. That is going to be followed by a display of artistic skill. Only when all those encounters resolve satisfactorily will she make her body available.”

“Will that kind of thing really attract customers?”

“Who knows? But I’m sure it will attract enough wealthy people if we are able to sell it as something to be bragged about.”

“.....I see. A thing of unmatched value. So even our shops need something like this.”

Rion’s organization had spread by virtue of offering services the competition did not have and now those special places would have special existences inside them. Ain finally comprehended that vision.

“Only deserving girls can obtain that position, though. Good looks are not enough. They need to be as refined as aristocrats, if not more. They need to have an aristocratic sense of pride too.”

“Eh? Pride?”

“She needs to be like an unreachable flower but once she accepts a customer, she has to be able and willing to offer everything. Just like, that “tsundere-thing” I was talking to you about before.”

“Ah, just like senior sister.”

“...I won’t let Ariel do such a thing.”

“Boss, I did not mean it that way. Gods. Head over heels as always, huh?”

When it came to Ariel, Rion’s personality changes. and Ain was happy to be able to see such a thing again after a long time.

“But, you’re right, a woman just like Ariel. Or rather, similar, there’s no other woman like her after all.”

“Like I said... Nevermind, alright boss. It might be impossible to find the same but close to her will do. You’re right, getting customers that are willing to put in as much money as required it would be good.”

With this, the type of the prostitute required was now settled. That would be enough for Ain and the others to take the matters into their own hands and implement the idea fully. They were excellent subordinates easy to utilize.

“So, I guess that’s about it for the matters regarding the capital.”

“Yes, boss. The next thing to discuss is our expansion efforts. That is proceeding well, we are nearly done with the takeover of the target city.”

“Didn’t that go rather fast?”

Execution of their plans had only taken half of the time expected. That made Rion more anxious than happy.

“That’s because there was no fight, boss.”

“We absorbed them?”

“It’s more like they joined us. To be honest I had doubts about allowing things to stay as they were over there but crushing those that want to join voluntarily would just end up making us fight everyone in the future.”

Since the other gang joined out of their own will, they were allowed to keep their internal structure unchanged. Ain was afraid of potential future betrayal.

But if they were to reject surrenders like that, the only other alternative would be to fight. And people with their back to the wall tended to fight with fierce desperation. That was a scary prospect to face.

“...Well, I guess we have no choice. Take your time thinking how to integrate them.”

Ain saw that Rion understood his worries and was relieved by this reply.

“So, I guess the next topic is how to devour all the remaining towns.”

“Yes, boss. Some of them don’t have criminal businesses to target and we can’t have all of them do the same thing, anyhow.”

“I agree. And thus...”

“Well get some of them to specialize in the fully illegal stuff.”

“Ah, so that’s why Gordon isn’t here.”

“Exactly, boss.”

Gordon hadn’t seen Rion for longer than Ain, so there was no way he wouldn’t show himself here if he was present.

Unfortunately, he was not in the capital at that moment. Gordon had more knowledge and experience in illegal operations, which was why he left to evaluate the newly conquered settlements and see what he can have them do

“...Just remember not to do things that attract too much attention.”

“Yes, boss. We are mindful of that. We won’t attempt anything that would have a negative effect on the highway’s public order, either. And we continuously make sure nobody else tries that behind our back.”

“Good, carry on like that.”

The royal highway between the capital and Camargue was the lifeline of Bandeaux. The present safety of travel made it a popular choice and brought plenty of gold to all the towns along its length.

“What’s next on the agenda?”

There still were things to discuss but they were not allowed to continue in peace.

“Boss, there’s a visitor for you.”

“Visitor? None of our guys then?”

This was a place that Resist operated specially for private talks just like this one. It belonged directly to the organization and did not operate as a real business. All the employees and supposed customers were members, there was no way for a complete stranger to stumble on this place.

“No, boss. He said he is looking for Baron Rion Frey.”

“Oh? Who the heck is that guy then?”

Ain interrupted the messenger with a harsh question. He was flustered that someone had managed to trace Rion here.

“He says he’s Royal Guard.”

“.....Oh. It must be this guy, the one supposed to fight with me. He must have asked around about how to find me.”

“Is that so, boss?”

Ain felt relief hearing that it was one of Rion’s noble subordinates. That was, however, somewhat premature.

“Oh, there you are. I was looking for you.”

“...Who told you to come inside?”

A stranger suddenly entered the room and the conversation. It was clear to Rion that the man was from Royal Guard, though, both from the messenger’s warning and the familiar uniform the visitor was wearing.

“Nobody. Nobody forbade me entrance either.”

Rion was not the type to swallow such frivolous excuses.

“Alright. Feel yourself forbidden. I am busy and I have no time for people like you. Get out.”

Even though he faced a clear rejection with no room for rebuttal, the stranger was not the type to back down.

“I don’t know what are you talking about here but, certainly, it’s not more important than the preparations for our departure?”

“Straight back at you. Are you done preparing the apprentice knights?”

“That’s still in progress.”

“Then return when you’re done with it.”

“It’s about to finish. I came to tell you to speed up your own preparations.”

Neither was faltering, despite the fact that this was not a topic worth a stubborn dispute.

“Waste of breath. We are well prepared and ready to go at any time.”

“What?”

“We can go even now if that’s fine with your side.”

Rion said that with a smug grin. That was uncharacteristic, but he was trying to provoke the man.

“...Don’t speak nonsense. Bandeaux troops had shown no signs of making any preparations at all.”

“None were required here in capital.”

“Are we not discussing an impending deployment?”

“We just came back from a battlefield. All we need are some supplies and provisions and those can be obtained in the towns along the route. We can head out at any moment without any issues.”

That was not a display of enthusiasm for the royal order he was given. He was painfully aware that mere rumors of an army’s deployment were bound to push up prices along its expected route. Rion pushed for an early departure to resupply before that would happen.

“...Then make yourself ready. We will be heading out tomorrow.”

The knight was clearly subdued by Rion's reply. The young baron would not let things go with this alone, though. It was his bad habit to show no mercy even in the most trivial of conflicts.

"Will you be able to catch up to us if we go at the same time?"

"Will I what?"

"Bandeaux detachment is not encumbered by a supply train, won't that make our pace faster?"

"...I see. So all the achievements I heard about are simply a fluke, huh?"

"Yup, fluke."

"..."

Rion was not being humble. He downplayed his abilities on purpose to easier catch out people by making them not be ready for his preparations.

"Why don't you just come again later? Or actually, save yourself the bother. We'll just leave when we hear you are departing. And we'll still be faster."

"...I will send a messenger when we set out."

"To Bandeaux army HQ if you may. This, incidentally, is not the place."

"...Of course."

And thus, Rion and Sol met for the first time. Both of them concluded this encounter with the absolutely worst possible impression of the other party, which was a completely unlike what the Knight Commander hoped for.



Maria too was preparing for the next battle, although she was not exactly getting ready to depart. Her goal was hindering Rion's plans.

Her first step was roping in Lancelot. Even though her relationship with Arnold, after she had supplanted Ariel, had improved so much that calling them lovers would not

be out of place, this had slowly changed with time since then. Once they graduated there had been fewer and fewer opportunities for the two to meet and spend time together.

Or at least that was how things looked from Maria's perspective. In reality, Arnold had been seeing her much more frequently than any single other person, even if rarely one on one.

This was why Maria wasn't confident about persuading Arnold and why she felt she needed Lancelot. He was the Crown Prince's closest friend, he should have no problems in achieving her goal. With that in mind, a meeting was arranged.

"You want the deployment of the Royal Guard squires stopped? For what reason?"

"It's not normal for someone that's not of royal blood to command them. You should not let this be."

That was the justification Maria came up with. And while it was certainly true, it was not enough to change Arnold's mind.

"Father approved the plan already. That reason alone is not enough to raise an objection."

This deployment was already underpinned by the royal decree. It was beyond Arnold to overrule that and Lancelot should have been aware of the fact.

"Is it fine for that man to keep taking all the glory?"

"What are you talking about, Lancelot?"

"The devil subjugation was a mission we personally received from your father, is it not odd that an outsider that joined at the last minute gets to take all the credit for success?"

Exploiting Arnold's envy was Lancelot's go-to method to get the Prince to agree to something. Moreover, it was the most effective strategy in the matters concerning Rion due to how the Prince felt about his rival. At least that was how things had worked during the Academy days.

"...Lancelot, have you not supported the idea of having Baron Frey join the subjugation

previously?”

“I...”

Lancelot never expected Rion to achieve so much. He had thought the young baron would end up running around in confusion while leading his pathetic army and had agreed only to have a chance of mocking him for that.

“Moreover, personal glory? Achievements? Is defeating the devils the most important thing right now? As long as the kingdom finds peace again, does it really matter who deals the final blow?”

Arnold’s mindset was different from Erwin’s, Maria’s and Lancelot’s. While the latter three all were looking to solidify their status and gain fame in this war, Arnold had no real need for any of that. Incidentally, Charlotte had similar thoughts. As a woman, she had no expectations to inherit her parent’s position or wealth, and all that awaited her was a political marriage to another noble. All she wanted was to push that fate away, even if by just a bit.

“That man reached for success over his former master’s corpse claiming his sister as a wife in the process. Is it really alright for someone like him to gain more recognition?”

Seeing that inciting jealousy did not work, Lancelot immediately changed his approach and tried to prod Arnold’s hatred.

“...Have you not see how he works? Whatever his motives, he discharges his duties dutifully and properly. I am not sure I know of another lord that works as hard as him. Do you disagree with that assessment?”

“That... May be true but-”

“This may not be appropriate for me to say... But, sometimes, I think Vincent died so that Rion could be set free into the world.”

In fact, Arnold was pretty close to guessing Vincent’s motives on that fateful day. While the young Windhill had not relished the idea of dying, he had not wanted Rion to waste the remainder of his life on him.

“And anyway, Ariel is clearly happy at his side. I do admit, I sometimes find it vexing

that it is not me that brings her that joy. But I am not proud of those moments and I should be grateful my stupid actions ended up having any kind of silver lining at all.”

“Arnold...”

“The fact that vexation always comes first is simply a proof I am still immature.”

“...Is that so.”

The fact that Arnold was now capable of saying such a thing was actually a proof of his growth. He had finally become aware of his own weakness and ceased to be someone easily manipulated. Lancelot made a huge blunder by not noticing that until now.

“Therefore, I am sorry Lancelot, I will not try stopping the deployment of the Royal Guard. And not only that, I plan to increase its scale.”

“What!?”

“I am negotiating permission to join Rion’s army with my personal retinue.”

“...Why would you do such a thing?”

“This too is vexing but I am clearly inferior to him in military matters. I think this is a matter of experience, though, and I expect I will be able to catch up if given chance to observe him closely. I wish to do exactly that.”

“Is that so...”

As opposed to the past, now Arnold was using his envy of Rion in a positive way. Lancelot, as his closest friend, should be happy to witness this change. But he was not. He had only got close to Arnold in the past because he could use the Prince for his own advantage. Even though, as a retainer, he had not had the option to stay away from Arnold, he should have minded the boundaries of the feudal contract. He had not done so.

He had, as a result, become neither Arnold’s true friend nor a loyal follower.

From this day, there would be a slowly expanding rift in his relationship with the Crown Prince, even if Arnold himself would, for now, remain unaware of the fact

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## Foot Notes

[1]-[2]-[3] All three are japanese english.

[4] (花魁) were courtesans in Japan. The oiran were considered a type of yūjo (遊女) “woman of pleasure” or prostitute. however, they are distinguished from ordinary yūjo in that they were entertainers, and many became celebrities outside the pleasure districts. – Wikipedia

# Chapter 52

## His Reason To Fight

Rion's Nyegert detached defense force, in the end, was to depart at the same time as the Royal Guard, despite the initial plans to the contrary. This was a result of the Knight Commander's intervention after he became aware of what was going on.

Frederick had hoped for a good relationship between Rion and Sol Aristes, which would naturally rule out working without cooperation like the two of them had intended to do. Moreover, now that the Crown Prince himself was to join the army on his own request, any independent actions were out of the question.

At the very least, Arnold had shown a desire to improve his relationship with Rion. With the knight commander coming to know that, he would make them all stick together.

Thus, he forced a fixed departure date on all three of them borrowing unspecified military authority to reinforce his orders.

Rion did not agree with that fact in the slightest but, unsurprisingly, he could not rebel against the military chain of command and had to match his departure date to the Royal Guard plans. This would not, of course, mean that he would just obediently do as he was told. He instantly started to formulate plans in order to avoid this utterly annoying development that he planned to implement after they left the capital. Still, he had to follow the orders to depart alongside the Royal Guard.

Today was the prescribed day. The place Rion had chosen to assemble his army, the Clans of Bandeaux, was completely unfit for that purpose.

Both he and Ariel were currently offering flowers at the gallows, with the clansmen in their colorful armor watching from behind. They were at the execution grounds where Vincent had died.

The day of the young lord's death was the last time Rion had been here. Ariel had never been here before. And now, finally, the two were able to visit. This occasion didn't put their resentment to rest. The grudge they held over Vincent's death was as strong as

ever and even now neither of them could forgive themselves for failing to protect him. They did, however, finally figure out what they should do from now on. They no longer dreamed vague dreams of revenge, they had a concrete plan of action.

And they came to share that plan with the soul of their departed master and brother. A plan that would start being executed from today.

The clansmen were, from a distance, simply watching, with interest, their Baron and his wife kneeling, seemingly lost in prayers, next to the scaffold. They knew nothing of the man named Vincent. However, the fact that their feudal lord, who had so far only shown them his rough side, was this sincere in front of his late former master prompted the clans into thinking that this former master must have been a person of an outstanding caliber.

Eventually, the young couple finished their offering and stood up. Rion descended from the gallows and stood in front of his army.

“Alright, let’s go.”

Even though this was their departure, Rion made them set out with a simple word without even making a speech. The horses of the married couple were brought over, they took the reins and set off.

The army followed slowly after the two of them.

Outside of the execution grounds, they were met by a banner of cavalry. They were the squires of the Royal Guard led by Sol numbering five hundred. Just a little bit more than the four hundred clansmen Rion was leading.

“...I’m sure I told you it would be better if you waited outside the capital.”

The very first words Rion greeted Sol with, as the Knight lined next to him, were words of complaint.

“I would find it troublesome if you decided to leave through a different gate.”

“Oh, I see, I could’ve done that.”

Rion ignored Sol’s sarcasm and actually managed to irritate the man with his reply. But the Knight did not come here to engage in such wordplay.

“...So it was true?”

“What?”

“I have been told that you were a valet in the past.”

“Ah, so it’s about that. What of it?”

“I have been also told that you have stormed the execution site alone to save your lord.”

“...Again, what of it?”

Rion’s facial expression sharpened. The fact that he had failed to prevent Vincent’s death was a scar on his heart and he did not want others to chatter about it lightly.

“Why did you go that far?”

“...I have no obligation to answer that question.”

“Then, I’ll change it. How does it feel to devote your loyalty to other people?”

“Is that a question a Royal Guardsman should be asking? Aren’t you supposed to serve the royal family with all your being?”

The Royal Guard reserved their loyalty for the royal family alone, not for the country. To be precise, they were entirely loyal to those members of the royal clan they happened to serve. So, despite being labeled as a single group, their loyalties actually divided and lay with different people. Or at least that was how it was supposed to be in theory. In practice, few of them would be willing to oppose the King in favor of their personal charge.

“...I do not have a person to serve.”

“Huh?”

“It is not like such a person does not exist. I just do not know where she happens to be right now.”

“...That doesn’t make any sense. What are you talking about?”

“There are those in the ranks of the Guard that are assigned to a charge from the moment that charge is born. Actually, that is not really correct. There are those who are picked as children to serve their future lord from the moment of his or her birth, always together as they grow up.”

It was the first time that Rion heard of a Royal Guard like that. However, even this did not make it clear what Sol was trying to say.

“...And you are one of those?”

“That I am.”

“Are you trying to brag about being a “chosen one”?”

“Ridiculous. I was supposed to serve the Princess, the Crown Prince’s younger sister.”

No “sister” ever existed, of course, but Sol trusted the news propagated after the child’s disappearance and did not know the truth.

“...That missing princess?”

“Yes, that one.”

“Wasn’t she found already?”

“What!? Is that true!?”

Rion’s words caused a striking change on Sol’s face. After all, that would be news about the lord the Knight was searching for all that time he was somehow not aware of.

“Isn’t it that woman? That otherworldly hero with black hair and blue eyes?”

Rion again, childishly, refused to speak Maria’s name. He did not want to offer even a hint of suggestion he was closer to her than before.

His question referred to the misleading information circling around her person during the Academy days.

“...That woman is of no royal blood.”

“Eh? Is that so? I’m sure I hear otherwise when I was still in the Academy.”

“The Queen herself denied those rumors.”

“Oh really. My lord, Vincent, was charged with disrespecting the royal family by disrespecting her. And she proves to be no royal, after all? The Queen should just have said that from the start.”

.Rion couldn’t help voicing his irritation even though he had long known those charges were bogus.

“...Aren’t your words right now actual disrespect, though?”

“File a complaint. I care not.”

“That is pointless. I have no proof, you would just claim innocence and that would be end of the matter.”

“Don’t worry. I have not a shred of loyalty to the Crown and I don’t intend to hide the fact.”

“You what?”

“The only person I am loyal to is Lord Vincent, nobody else. That always has and will continue to be the truth.”

“...Why?”

In the end, they returned to Sol’s first question. The subject, Rion’s ongoing loyalty to an already dead master, was complex, though. It was, nevertheless, something that the Knight, who had also lost the person he was supposed to serve, was really keen to hear.

“There’s just nobody else, I guess. Ariel would be an option if she wasn’t my wife already.”

“...You have received land and a title from the King. Do you not owe him loyalty?”

“I didn’t really want what I got and I’m scrupulously discharging my duties as the lord of the land I was given. Is that really enough to demand loyalty from me?”

“...I don’t understand. You should be loyal to the kingdom you serve.”

“Should I? Is a sense of obligation really enough to give birth to loyalty? I’m sure that was not what prompted me to become dedicated to Lord Vincent. I remained as his valet only because he made me want to do something for him as a person.”

“...Is that so.”

Rion was saying that loyalty born out of a sense of obligation was no true loyalty at all. It was not something that Sol found hard to disagree with. It also, however, made him struggle to make sense of his feelings towards the missing princess.

“How should I say this... In your place, I would have to meet the person first. Without that, it’s not possible to know whether she’s worth serving or not.”

He spoke to console the visibly downhearted Sol but his words offered no respite.

“You make it sound so simple. Do you know just how many years have I been trying to do exactly that?”

“How many? How should I know?”

“And that is exactly why you should not say such words lightly.”

“I find that less of an offense than gossiping about someone else’s loyalty”

“I...”

“But frankly, it’s not like I can make sense of my feelings either. What I feel to my lord is more than devotion. There’s friendship maybe... It just feels like something entirely different.”

“...Entirely different?”

“No idea. All I know that Lord Vincent and Ariel alone did earn my trust in this world.”

Sol would probably not understand no matter how much he asked. The siblings were the first people the ever-scorned Rion decided to trust, the only people to ever offer him their goodwill.

But even so, not being able to understand could not keep the Knight from asking more.

“How can you still be normal despite losing that kind of person? Was it thanks to your wife?”

“...I think calling me normal is arguable but if you see me as such, that is probably because I finally figure out what should I do.”

“And what is that?”

“I will gain fame.”

“Fame?”

“The most recognition out of anyone fighting the demon threat. I will make my name be heard everywhere in the kingdom.”

“...You desire success?”

Sol was confused. This didn't at all fit to what they were discussing until now.

“Not at all. When my name spreads, so will the name of Lord Vincent. I will make it known to all denizens of this land that Vincent Woodville was the only person Baron Rion Frey had ever pledged his allegiance to. And I will make them understand how big of a mistake must have been to execute that person.”

If he was being forcefully dragged back onto the main stage, he would make use of the exposure. This was Rion's decision. He had resolved himself to no longer avoid the game's constraints but to exploit them for his own purpose instead and break the system.

“That's...”

Sol did not know what hid in Rion's heart.

He did, however, know that Rion's plan of elevating Vincent's name in this manner would draw heavy scorn on the Crown that executed him on flimsy charges. He knew that as a Royal Guard he should be trying to stop the boy.

But Rion's words touched the Knight's heart. The young baron still dutifully working

for the sake of his lost lord represented the ideal Sol was aspiring to be.

“I won’t order, or expect, you to help me. But do not get in my way, I have no room to tolerate such things.”

The deeper meaning behind those words remained a mystery to the Knight. Rion said nothing more and merely hastened his horse signaling the end of their conversation.

Even if Sol had the chance to ask another question, he would probably get no answer. Having no room to tolerate obstructions usually meant that all people interfering would be removed and it wasn’t something to say to a potential target.

Helpless, the Knight could only urge his horse onwards. And at this point, he actually noticed his surroundings. The execution grounds were located quite a distance away from the outer walls. Any army crossing those streets, even if it numbered less than a thousand, was bound to attract attention. Moreover, the Clans of Bandeaux were wearing their customary colorful armor making them a rare sight for the citizens barely used to the sight of the normal knights.

And then there were the people at the head of the march, Ariel and Rion, riding next to each other, looking like a couple out of a painting, that couldn’t help finding themselves in the center of attention even if they tried.

Rion wanted to make a person’s name known throughout the country. Sol suddenly understood that this plan was already being implemented but that was the only facet of it that he was aware of so far. Rion’s schemes were more complex than this.

Several days after that day it would be widely known that the colorful army that marched through the capital was from the territory called Bandeaux. Everyone would learn they were lead by the person they had known as the Valet Rion. And the minstrels would sing about the miraculous love story that brought him and Ariel together after the death of his lord and her brother, Vincent Woodville.

Incidentally, Rion would later scold the slum operatives behind the operation for setting him up as the hero of those stories.



Arnold and his army awaited by the northern gate. His presence was troublesome to Rion but, because it had been decided above his head, he resigned himself to bear with it. And there was one unexpected addition to an otherwise ordinary military marching column.

Charlotte herself joined them. This was a big surprise for Rion, he expected her to travel in Maria's group with the main force.

He had not spared much thought to her previously but now, when the customary conversation with her involvement started, it had quickly developed into a rather complicated affair.

She, knowingly or not, had suddenly become an intermediary of sorts between Arnold and Rion.

"Where did the soldiers from Rion's retinue go?"

Rion, right after leaving the capital, had split the clans into separate independent elements. That was what Charlotte was asking about.

"They're heading towards our destination at a distance as separate units."

"I see."

"...Could you tell me why are you doing such a thing?"

Hearing Rion's answer Arnold muttered a follow-up question.

"Why is Rion having them do that?"

"...They're training."

"I see."

"Marching drills? Hmm, not possible, that would be done within the commander's vision."

Arnold muttered again.

“What kind of training is Rion having them do?”

“...Our objective is to crush the separate demon packs before they manage to merge into a big horde. Miss Charlotte is aware of this, right?”

“I am, even someone like me would know that.”

“The demons will be coming along different routes from the areas next to the border of the kingdom. My plan was to split the troops in order to defeat them in one go.”

“I see.”

“Hmm, splitting forces... There is a non-insignificant chance it will feed the army to the enemy piecemeal. That does not sound like such a good idea...”

And yet another, doubtful, thought muttered by the prince.

“Erm...”

But this time his words were too complicated for Charlotte to translate.

“Ah fine already. Incidentally, did Miss Charlotte plan to march with us with this particular aim in mind from the very beginning?”

“Not at all. I was, however, thinking that the current situation is just rather sad.”

“...Haa, women are really like “that”, aren’t they?”

And by “that” he meant, but did not say, paying attention to Arnold’s needs and giving everything to the man she loved.

“Rion is wrong!!”

“Eh?”

Her loud reply bewildered Rion. Seeing his behavior, Charlotte realized her own blunder.

“I-It’s just... I was just trying to get my two friends to get along better. That is all.”

“...So I am actually friends with Miss Charlotte?”

“You are. I am fairly convinced of that.”

“Ah, is that so...”

It was hard to offer denial to something declared this bluntly. Rion ended up accepting himself as her friend, albeit with mixed feelings.

“So? What is Rion’s answer to Prince Arnold’s doubt?”

“...I agree keeping forces concentrated would be preferable. But by staying as one force we will not be able to execute a successful defense in the face of simultaneous attack by a dispersed enemy. And what I mean by that is preventing even a single village from being attacked.”

For the first time in this conversation, Rion looked straight at Arnold while answering. He was getting tired of having Charlotte relay messages between them.

“Is that... Even possible?”

Rion outlined his best case scenario. Arnold found it implausible.

“I do not know. Which is why the drills.”

“I do not understand the method or purpose.”

“Coordination and communication... We’re training to move efficiently as a dispersed force.”

“...That explains nothing.”

“I’m drilling them to regularly and frequently dispatch messengers with the latest situation of their group. I’m learning to estimate how long will it take them to get from their current location to our goal and which group needs to be moved next. I’m learning when and how to merge or disperse them again. Those are the kinds of things we practice”

“...Can you really do that?”

“Again, I do not know. It’s hard to tell if something is possible if you do not try. Which is why we drill, to try.”

“Is that so...”

With this Arnold understood the concept but found himself unable to visualize how would it work in practice. To have armies move by use of messengers? He could not believe Rion was just trying such a thing like it was the most natural idea in the world. And he also nearly immediately got an answer whether it was a good approach.

“Red – about to reach destination.”

“You’re late. Tell them to send messengers earlier. The current timing makes them stop the march while they await your return. It’s a waste of time.”

“Sir!”

“Orders are to proceed to the south-eastern village as per plan. The distance to the main force will grow, they are to mind their calculations.”

“Yes, sir!.”

Having received Rion’s orders, the messenger immediately set out to return. And as more of his peers showed up the scene was hard to believe.

“Blue; awaiting instructions.”

“Before you get orders – their current location?”

“To the west, forming a triangle with the main force and the destination.”

“Good, as expected. Orders are to join up with the main force at the destination. They are to be careful of misidentifying the designated spot.”

Orders were given to the messenger, the messenger would leave the main force. The same pattern repeated with the blue and green detachments.

There was no respite. Messengers arrived one after another, so frequently that it became hard to track how often they showed up. Moreover, sometimes Rion would give seemingly conflicting orders to two successive messengers from the same troop.

“...Will this not give birth to confusion at your separated squads?”

Arnold worried that frequently changing orders would introduce disarray to the entire operation disabling an entire element of their force.

“They will only get confused if they try to think too much. All I need them to do is to diligently follow the most recent order, even if it conflicts with everything they received so far.”

“...That may be true but.”

“There are two hard aspects in this scheme. One is having the messengers return to their squads promptly and without fail. That requires those squads to be careful to move at a fixed pace. The other is dealing with information those messengers bring here so that you can give them the next set of orders.”

“And if that is achieved?”

“In theory, our separate elements would move about efficiently lowering the chance that a demon pack slips through our net. The training will tell whether this idea is feasible or not.”

“I agree.”

In other words, the person trained was Rion and he was practicing issuing correct orders according to the information he received from his detached squads. What struck Arnold was that Rion was doing this, continuously, on the horseback, and without even sparing a glance to the map. He was able to picture the whole situation in his mind.

The Prince suddenly thought that if Rion was able to do all that without mistakes, achieving smooth maneuvers by his detachments as a result, then his idea of learning all kind of things just from being at his side might have been outrageously foolish.

# Chapter 53

## The Bandeaux School of Fencing

Rion's Detached Force's lodging for the night was to be at the town of Mavs. It was the first fortress-city on the highway leading from the capital towards Nyegert.

Rion chose this place because it was more than able to accommodate a force that was just barely a thousand strong. This was also to be the place where the results of the day's training would be made clear.

And it proved to be a total failure. Clan Yellow arrived well before the main force and the other three not only made it late but also with the wrong timing. Things did not go as Rion had planned them at all.

The Crown Prince, upon learning of all this, felt a rather complex mixture of disappointment and relief. The reason for the latter was understandable and obvious, Rion's talent proved to be something not entirely beyond his reach.

Once he realized he was feeling that, Arnold started to fear himself. The idea that the jealousy of Rion might be taking hold of him again filled the Prince with dread. He still remembered, and was by now fully aware of, the madness born of his tangled relationship with the Freys. It was not something he could ever forget.

That was possible because the Crown Prince had grown up without realizing that fact himself.

And even if he did realize, that would not let him forget his past either. Arnold's fear of himself was the main reason why the Prince was able to stay modest in recent months. Coming to grips with the failure of his Academy days made him grow, even if Ariel and Rion might not agree that he did or forgive him for what had happened.

So Arnold was just standing, internally shaken, staring at Rion, who didn't pay him the tiniest bit of attention. The young baron's mind was busy with too many things to allow for distractions.

"Now then, let's figure out the reason for this failure."

Rion was not the kind of person that gave up after one failure. Furthermore, he was fully expecting this particular one and did not think the maneuvers would go well on the first try.

“Well, I say this, but there’s no need to think deeply. Our traveling speeds are a mess. Unless that changes, we can’t proceed as planned.”

That became obvious as soon as he had started to receive the reports from the messengers. The unit positions in those had not matched the results of his mental calculations and everything had been jumbled so much that some clans had been much ahead of the plans while others had been as heavily delayed.

“Making separate armies march at matching speed is not a simple feat. Miscalculations are bound to happen.”

Cassius tried to make an excuse but Rion would not let the thing slide.

“This is not just a simple miscalculation. Some of you guys were late, the others were too fast. Were you even trying to match each other?”

“Of course, lord”

“Oh? How exactly?”

“Eh?”

“What kind of schemes did you employ to achieve that?”

“Scheme...?”

Cassius’ voice grew fainter with each answer. It was clear they had done nothing in particular.

“Did you try guessing your position by the sun? Did you try counting the number of steps made by your horses? Or maybe you employed one of the myriad other possible solutions?”

Cassius and the rest of the clan heads suddenly had an “Oh, I get it now” expressions on their faces.

“Ah, no. We will do those things next time.”

“You lot, try to use those heads of yours at least! I am not aware of any regulations that require military men to be idiots!”

Rion got tired of their attitude of leaving all the thinking up to him. Which, in fact, was exactly what they had been doing. For them thinking was Rion’s role.

“You say that Lord but all people have their strong and weak points.

Cassius replied defiantly.

“Man... Mercury’s guards can do this very well, you know?”

“Wha!?”

“They are not only younger than you, they also have half your numbers. And yet they succeeded at this. Moreover, they can do this at three different speeds.”

“Three speeds?”

“Slow March, Forced March and Double Time. Nevermind the names though.”

“...How are they able to do that?”

“I had them trained. Initially, because I thought it would be too boring for them just to run around the barony but then I figured it might be a handy skill to have when the time to use them comes.”

“Don’t tell me, do you plan to use them in the fight with the demons?”

“I don’t understand the question? Are there any other reasons? Even I trained in things I wouldn’t even suspect I was capable of until I tried. Having them possess that ability means they will not have to be urgently drilled in it if the combat area ever moves to Bandeaux. I have long known where do I want which troops to go in that case.”

“...That’s.”

Cassius yet again couldn’t shake the impression that no matter how much time they spend with their Lord he will always be able to surprise them.

“But honestly, I held a naive expectation that learning this would be easier for you guys due to your age and experience. I guess that was foolish of me.”

“...Our apologies.”

The clan heads seemed to shrink under the barrage of Rion’s criticism. They did, however, prefer that to being yelled at.

“Let’s appoint [pacemakers] first.”

“Pe?”

“Designate some people to be a reference point for others. Pick those blessed with an exceptional sense of time or distance, show them the expected standard marching speed. Then disperse them among the individual elements and tell the soldiers to match that speed. This should help everybody get a grip of the sensation.”

“...It would have been better if lord had us do that from the very beginning.”

Cassius had no problems understanding that explanation and expected it would be possible for the clansmen to pull the plan off with this.

“If I did that, neither of you would take this idea seriously, wouldn’t you? Dealing with adults is always troublesome like that. Completely unlike Mercury’s people, who enjoyed the experience and the intellectual challenge of this exercise.”

“...Our apologies.”

Cassius had no problems understanding this either.

“Choose a person from each clan according to the criteria I listed before. If not enough suitable people can be found, have everyone estimate the time over a sufficiently long period and pick the ones deviating the least.”

“Understood.”

With all those measures in place, Rion’s soldiers started the exercise from the basics again. This, however, made Arnold worry they will not be ready in time.

“We are only a month away from our destination. Can we still make it in that time?”

The Prince decided to voice his worries.

“We won’t know until we try. That’s why we’ll do what we can.”

“What if we do not make it?”

“I’ll figure out a different approach. And if that does not work, we’ll try something else again. What other choice do we have?”

“...You are right. It is exactly as you say.”

There was no way they could just give up if their first try was a failure. Simply giving up upon encountering an adversity would resolve nothing. That was a very obvious fact but very few people lived by that maxim, Rion being one of them.

If never giving up was his talent, then it was not impossible for others to emulate. It was just a matter of correct mindset. But Arnold couldn’t fail to notice that keeping up this kind of mindset constantly was hard and it may be a talent of its own.

He concluded that the thing to learn from Rion wasn’t necessarily his tactics but rather his attitude.



Because the independent maneuver training reverted to the very basics, for the time being, the whole army started to move together again. And that allowed Rion to work on something else.

His swordsmanship. As usual, his practice was accompanied by his teacher, Kiel. But other clan heads being present would not allow the leader of Clan Blue to be the only sparring partner.

So Rion had to spar with all of them one after another.

“Fast as ever!”

“You might’ve improved a bit but you still have much to learn!”

Mohit<sup>[1]</sup>, usually a quiet and withdrawn character, tended to liven up during those times. But the latter was true for all other clan heads too.

The Sword of Clan Green was based on speed and agility and the head of the clan was like a wind with a blade in hand. All Rion could do, despite his arduous training, was to barely keep up.

And it wasn't like Mohit was going all out, he was expending just enough effort to challenge Rion. After all, in the eyes of the clan heads, the objective was to train the young baron, not to beat him up mercilessly.

"What did I tell you before!?"

"To watch my steps, right!? And I'm doing just that!"

"You're not doing it right at all!"

"Eh!? Really!?"

"Cease combat! Let's discuss this."

"A-Alright."

Rion was someone to learn dutifully no matter who the teacher was but Mohit's criticism made it look like that had not been the case this time. This made the boy feel a bit down.

"To be brief, Lord is too greedy."

"Greedy?"

"I do not need to explain the difference between the swordsmanship of the four clans by now, right?"

"Red is attacking, Blue is defensive, Green focuses on speed and Yellow on power."

"All of them have different strong points. But conversely, their forms differ too. And despite that Lord tries to learn them all at once. That is why I call you greedy."

"...So it's impossible after all, huh?"

Just as Mohit had said, Rion was trying to learn them all. "It's unknown whether something is impossible until you try" – that was a rule he applied to all aspects of his

life.

However, when learning to fence, this attitude was wrong.

“For you, Lord, it may be doable, but your approach is wrong.”

“Approach?”

“Each of styles has its own scheme that has been refined into the completed form. You are aware of this, Lord, are you not?”

“I am.”

“Even so, Lord is trying to mix all of that together. That not only cannot be done but the result of the attempts will not make a better, flawless style.”

“...I can't disagree.”

The sword style of every single clan was developed to best display their specialties. Trying to cherry-pick the best elements out of them was not only the wrong approach, it was also an impossible goal.

“The correct method would be to learn one of the styles before trying to grasp the others.”

“You're right.”

“With that settled, let's put the sparring on hold and go over the styles to choose one.”

“Yeah, alright.”

“Since footwork – choosing the shortest, quickest step with the minimal amount of movement – is the most important aspect of fencing, Lord should learn our sword style.”

Rion assented and Mohit started to teach the Clan Green's style from the basics but some people objected. The other clan heads.

“Wait a minute. Why should Green's sword be the first?”

Cassius interfered not at all agreeing with the outcome.

“I agree. Since I am our Lord’s teacher, it would be correct to learn my sword style first.”

Kiel added to the complaints while asserting himself as the teacher.

“No, no. That would be strange too. Besides, since when is Kiel the only teacher of the Lord?”

And Apollo chipped in too. Neither of them wanted Mohit to get one over them and every single one wanted their style to be taught first.

“Footwork is the foundation of all swordsmanship. Our style excels in that, being the fastest of the four. Having good footwork will let our Lord learn other styles easier. “

“I disagree. When it comes to footwork, our style is better. There’s no faster footwork than the one of Clan Red.”

Still unwilling to lose, Cassius rolled out his personal theory.

“I think I have something to add on this topic too. Our style does not lose balance and freedom of movement whatever the stance or position. And that truly is the foundation of defense and all swordsmanship. I really believe our Lord should start with the style of Clan Blue.”

Kiel also immediately claimed that the footwork of his style was the best one.

“Hold your horses. The power of the sword is born from sharp and deep footsteps. That is the foundation and that is why it’s important to start with the style of Clan Yellow.”

Even though Apollo’s powerful style could make no claims to fancy footwork, that would not stop him from claiming that it should be the first one.

Every one of them was serious about this topic and all of their claims were sound.

“So, to sum it up, every Clan’s Sword is rooted in the footwork?”

The clan heads paved the way to this conclusion. Rion just gave it a voice.

“What?”

All four of them found this surprising though as if they were completely unaware of the fact before.

“...You really haven’t noticed this even though you lived in one land all this time?”

“Just because we lived together does not mean we got along. A shared enemy forces cooperation but usually we would be competing with, and killing, one another having eyes on the leadership of Bandeaux.”

Clans White and Black excluded, the denizens of Bandeaux had been locked in permanent conflict over who controlled the territory’s government. None of them, understandably, had been willing to offer their rivals secrets behind their sword styles, leading to present day scenario.

“Well, unexpectedly, it looks like all four of your styles may come from one source that fractured into separate factions that pursue different traits.”

“...We can’t deny that possibility.”

“And if that’s the case, there must be common points in all of the four. I get the feeling it’s all in the footwork and those similarities will be the actual foundation of all of them.”

Rion was speaking about a possibility of developing a style of fighting based on foundations behind all four of the clan swords. This should be doable if they really originated at the same source.

“Assume those exist, Lord, what then?”

“I would like to learn those foundations and then it would just be a question of applying the styles based on that.”

“I knew it...”

In the end, Rion did not set aside his greed. He still wanted to obtain all the traits from all the styles. He wanted a style of sword that excelled in attack, defense, speed, and power.

“Alright. In that case, I’ll start explaining the foundations of the Blue Sword’s footwork. If there really are commonalities with the other three, maybe we’ll find something.”

Kiel decided to cooperate with Rion’s wishes regardless of whether they were realistic or not. And he staked his claim to going first.

“...Wait a minute. How did it come to that? I believe there won’t be any problems even if my style was to be the first.”

However, he was not the only one to think along those lines. The other three, their relationship with Rion still awkward, decided not to skimp on cooperation on this matter.

“Like I said, core footwork of the yellow style is certain to be the basis for most of it.”

And they ended up competing against each other for another while.

“I did hear all was not well between them but...”

Arnold muttered while looking at them from the side. The rumors of the thorny relationship between Rion and his notional retainers reached the Crown Prince’s ears. As did the complaints of the clan heads made during the banquet in Harcourt.

However, what he had seen now was different to what he expected. Instead of discord, there was competition for Rion’s attention.

“I believe they all want to be recognized by Rion.”

“Eh?”

He was answered by someone he did not in his wildest dreams expect to speak to him. Ariel.

“...Rion deemed it acceptable to speak with Arnold, I shall do so too.”

Although that way of speaking to a crown prince was rather insolent, Arnold would never dare to complain. He knew he had done many unforgivable things and, moreover, he actually now preferred to be addressed in a blunt and direct way that Ariel employed.

“A desire for recognition, huh...”

Arnold could reply with neither gratitude nor apologies because he knew Ariel needed neither.

“Rion has been ignoring their dissatisfaction. That being the case, they should have done something to earn his recognition but they were hamstrung by self-inflicted, pointless humility brought about by thinking they are just military personnel.”

“I see. But I believe that could not be helped.”

“Oh? It could not?”

“Rion excels way too much. Seeing that, comparing him to themselves, they were bound to be anxious about what could they even do.”

“...Hmm, who are you exactly talking about right now?”

“Ah, well...”

A remark he wanted to make casually was immediately seen through by Ariel. Arnold understood that immediately from her stern expression.

“...Their feelings and mine are alike. But with my status being what it is, I cannot help but feel envy.”

The clan heads were Rion’s subordinates. Being mindful of their status, they would not allow their anxiety born from witnessing Rion’s many talents to grow beyond self-depreciation. But the Crown Prince’s position was different. He would, eventually, become Rion’s sovereign and that fact caused the same feelings to develop in another way.

The Prince was honest with himself and accepted that inevitability. He knew trying to deny this would only make Ariel hate him more.

“Still, I will not repeat my mistakes. I would like you to believe me on that.”

“I can promise nothing, even though his highness wishes so. Does the reason need to be explained?”

“...No, it does not. And I guess I have no right to ask you to believe me either.”

“...People feel envy for Rion only because they do not know him at all.”

Ariel did not believe the Prince but Arnold’s words did have an effect.

“Elaborate, please?”

“No one knows how much Rion suffers beneath his facade. Nobody who would come to know my husband’s true feelings could be jealous of what he is.”

“...You know them, I presume”

“I have seen how Rion suffers at times but even I cannot claim to understand those feeling fully.”

“Is that so...”

Revenge against the World. That was the common objective of Ariel and Rion. Ariel, a person of this world, did not understand what Rion meant by “World”. Her scope of comprehension was limited and, for her, the actual target of revenge was the kingdom.

That was why she could not completely understand Rion’s suffering. She could not emphasize with the feelings of Rion who was fighting against the heavy pressure of the World itself.

That fight was the reason why the current Rion, compared to his days as a valet, was even more strict towards people and get irritated by many things.

Before, the idea that all he had been doing had been for Ariel’s and Vincent’s sake had helped him to calm his feelings. The current Rion could not do the same and, what was more, his heart was weighed down by the impression that his surroundings were being dragged into his revenge.

Ariel had noticed this and was frustrated by the fact she could do nothing to help him despite seeing the problem.

Contrary to their appearance of a happy couple, there was sadness in their relationship not visible to others. This was exactly why Ariel insisted on being next to Rion. She could do nothing but she still wanted to be of some use. And if he ever

crumbled, she wanted to fall into the abyss with him.

Rion wouldn't let Ariel die. He was not allowed to die before her either. The pledge that Marchioness Windhill demanded from him was what made Ariel's method possible.

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#### Foot Notes:

[1] We have changed Mo-heitor to Mohit. Sorry, we totally couldn't figure out how this name works back then.

# Chapter 54

## Event: The Defense of Nyegert

The primary war potential of the forces dispatched to the defense of Nyegert was a five thousand strong army of knights. In addition to that, there were three smaller interception forces deployed in the area of the city, each numbering two thousand. This made up an eleven thousand strong army further reinforced by a reserve force made up from various local noble retinues that amounted to another six thousand of men.

The Kingdom was not negligent in the slightest and had their defensive posture around Nyegert polished to perfection.

“Sir! The scouts report two thousand in the north, two groups of ten thousand total in the northwest and a group of three thousand in the northeast. All heading this way.”

“What about the assault unit?”

“In pursuit of the reinforcing demons and heading this way. “

“Mhm. I guess things are going according to the plan.”

The Marshall of the Crown seemed satisfied with the scout reports. The army might have been slightly less numerous than the enemies but there were no problematic demon variants spotted and the hostiles were cornered, about to be encircled in front of Nyegert.

This was enough to convince him that the victory was assured, but did not make him drop his vigilance.

“Fifteen thousand, huh? Has the detached force really done its job?”

Lancelot, engaged in conversation with the Marshall when the report arrived, offered a sarcastic question.

“It looks like they have contributed a bit. The demons were more numerous last time.”

His question was answered by Maria, who revealed a hint of her true intentions with the phrase “contributed a bit”. The leading role here would be hers and Rion would not get to hinder her anymore.

Arnold being part of Rion’s detached force was also a really huge problem for her. It made her feel as if the queen ending was slowly slipping out of her grasp. This kind of development was unsettling enough to make her want to do something about it immediately.

“But even so, that is still fifteen thousand. There should be no problem if they are small fries but what if there are stronger variants like during the last time?”

Erwin looked to be focused on thinking about the imminent battle, the detached force not on his mind.

But in fact, he was just pretending to be apathetic. In his heart, he was as flustered as Maria, if not more. Having Rion perform even more great deeds and get closer to the Crown Prince would endanger his position as the heir of the House.

Even though Ariel had been banished by the House Windhill, Lord Marquess had doted on Ariel. Rion might have no standing to challenge him but any child he would have with Ariel would be a completely different matter. Erwin felt pressured to achieve more than Rion, to make his name be known more widely.

“The demons... That last time there were some unexpected types.”

This time Maria wanted to avoid saying careless things that would damage their trust in her even more.

“Is that so. Actually, what kind of demons variants are the strongest?”

“It’s not the demons that are the strongest, it’s the devils.”

“Was one of them not easily defeated by some unnamed army before, though?”

In the previous battle, Kiel and his clan managed to kill a devil. He, like all of the soldiers hailing from remote territories, was just a nameless, worthless, existence for Erwin.

“That happened because the devils have not obtained their full power yet. They gain

their strength slowly as time goes by.”

“What do you mean? Are they growing?”

“That’s not really correct. Their main objective is the resurrection of the Demon God, their god. As the seal binding him weakens, more and more of his power materializes in the world making the devils stronger.”

“...The devils have a god?”

Erwin had never heard about the Demon God before. This news made him worry about their ability to defeat a deity-like existence.

“This process can be prevented. This is exactly why we’re trying to subjugate them.”

Maria tried to reassure Erwin but since he did not know anything about the game or its endings, she achieved an opposite effect. It didn’t help that she had only the good outcome in mind.

“What will happen if that god of the devils revives?”

“A bad ending. The kingdom will be ruined.”

“ ... ”

“Relax. Stopping this is exactly the reason why I came to this world. And together with everyone I will protect it from the devils.”

“...That is true.”

Erwin couldn’t understand where did Maria get her confidence from. He did, however, comprehend that she must have been carrying even heavier a burden than he had imagined previously.

“Looks like they are here.”

Lancelot, having been scanning the horizon, announced the arrival of the horde.

“And about time. Now then, let’s go!”

She and her entourage, not wanting to repeat the mistake from the previous battle, descended from the outer wall and headed to the army encamped outside the city.



Driven by the desire not to make the same error again, Maria tried to copy Ariel and rouse the soldiers with a speech. It did not work like she expected it would.

At the same moment, and in a way according to expectations, Rion's detached force also made its appearance on the battlefield. But, unlike the previous time, it completely ignored the kingdom's army charging straight at the enemy instead. The demon horde spotted by Lancelot was suddenly under attack from three directions.

This left the knights not involved in the engagement. This demon group only numbered two thousand, so with three detached groups of twelve hundred attacking at the same time, there was hardly any room for the main force to join.

"Let's join the fight! Even on our own!"

Since the knights were not moving, Maria wanted her group to advance on their own.

"Impossible. We will not be able to fight properly in that kind of melee."

Lancelot refused and was justified in his objection. Their specialty was magic. Trying to use spells in a close quarters battle would only catch allies in the area of effect.

"But if this keeps up..."

"Maria, do calm down. Remember the ten thousand strong main enemy force? It must contain a devil in its ranks and once it arrives it shall be our time to shine."

"...Okay."

Maria decided to obediently wait for the time when the horde of ten thousand arrived. Once that happened they would, unsurprisingly, be required to participate. It wasn't like at Harcourt where Rion had charged enemy many times more numerous than his troops, they wouldn't be just facing goblins here. This horde had many strong types of demons, including ogre-class monsters.

However, it soon became clear those powerful foes were no challenge to the detached

groups and they were killed off one after another. The reason not a mystery for long, the addition of Arnold and Charlotte made the detached force much stronger than when it only had Rion and Ariel in its arsenal. Maria struggled to get to grips with a situation where those two, who should have been her battle potential, fought alongside Rion instead.

No sooner was the enemy exterminated, their threat dispersed, when another group, three thousand strong this time appeared in the distance. Rion's soldiers found themselves in a hectic situation without a chance to catch a breath. But that was when two more of his independent elements appeared on the field accompanied by one of the screening forces of the main army.

Spells of four different elements were launched at the approaching enemy causing massive damage and the battle was joined again. This time it was the demons against a mixed force of Rion's newly arrived squads and the screening troops.

While that was happening, the troops that fought the first engagement were busy treating the injured and preparing for the next battle.

"...Lancelot."

Maria, watching this from the sidelines, spoke up with displeasure.

"Ah, y-yes. I can see that."

Lancelot could also see what was happening. Even if the main enemy force was ten thousand strong, all the screening elements combined with Rion's forces would add up to seven thousand. That was enough to try to offer a fight without having to rely on the main knight army.

If things kept developing in that direction, this battle too would end up without them taking part. Lancelot found that prospect very frustrating. And so did Maria but she also found her thoughts to be in a complete disarray.

The Defense of Nyegert was one of the game events. She couldn't comprehend how a major event like that could possibly end without the main protagonist, her, participating. The only thing she was somewhat certain of was that she now had a rival character in the Strategy Arc, and that character was Rion.

She had never encountered any scenario like this and she had no clue how to deal with

this situation. She kept asking herself how could the things end up the way they were now.

Why did the situation become like this? One of the answers was: because Rion had them develop in this way.

“Next group is imminent! Reform ranks!”

Having been appraised of what was about to unfold, Rion barked an order at the soldiers catching a breather.

“How many are we talking about?”

This question came from Arnold.

“Two groups from the northwest. Six thousand followed by another four. Ten thousand total.”

“Two groups? We could deal with them one by one.”

“Can’t be done. They are too close to each other. If we were to be attacked by the second group while still fighting the first one, things would get complicated.”

“I see. How shall we proceed?”

“...Let’s have a short break.”

Rion paused to think for a while before giving this answer.

“A break?”

An answer Arnold found completely unexpected.

“Messengers to all groups. Disperse to the northwest. Regroup behind incoming the enemy. Assume half an hour distance. Keep in mind the demons travel in two groups. Don’t confuse them. That is all.”

“Yes, sir!”

The messengers, having memorized the instructions, spread out to all the groups

currently fighting.

“Message to the screening elements. Delay the pursuit. Wait for us to reorganize. That is all.”

“Understood!”

Rion even sent a messenger to the screening elements notionally attached to the main army. Those had started to cooperate with him due to the influence of the Crown Prince and his Royal Guard and had begun accepting instructions even though the Baron had no official authority over them.

“Well, and what about you?”

Having finished dispatching the messengers, Rion turned towards Arnold.

“Am I to remain here as the bait, perhaps?”

Arnold, after acting alongside Rion until now, gained an understanding of his intentions. The goal was military achievements through the means of detached force alone, that was the core of the strategy he had witnessed.

“I have said nothing of the sort.”

“Is that so. I shall go with you then. That sounds like a more interesting idea.”

“...Alright. Let us go then.”

The detached force elements withdrew from the field one after another. Unsure of their intentions, the knights of the main army watched that in confusion.

But they did not have long to dwell on that. Very soon the main demon horde appeared from the northwest. As the detached force was not present any more, there was no one else but the main army to fight this new enemy. This was something that not only Maria and her group, but the entire force of knights desired. Even they desired to distinguish themselves in battle.

Once they were in range, Maria and her companions wrought a large scale magic that did great damage to the enemy. Then the knight army, five thousand strong, joined the battle. So did one, two thousand strong, screening element. With this, it was seven

thousand knights against six thousand demons and the kingdom's forces immediately gained an advantage.

Until the trailing group of four thousand demons made its appearance.

"Left wing is to hold the assault of the demons!"

"Center needs reinforcements! We cannot hold them back!"

The four thousand demons that made their appearance were different to the groups they have fought until now. Although they were the same familiar variants, they moved and behaved completely different. They seemed to be commanded and react exactly like an army would.

"Maria! What on earth is going on?"

Seeing the knights, who held the upper hand thus far, be thrown into disarray by a flank attack, Lancelot lost his cool and asked Maria in a panic.

"There's a devil leading them!"

"Which one of them is it!?"

"We don't know yet!"

A single being in a horde of thousands – it was really hard to reliably point the right target.

"Ah, no, found him! That guy!"

Erwin yelled that he identified the devil, something that should not be so easily achievable. Looking in the direction he was pointing at, Maria and Lancelot saw a demon that not only was acting oddly but was also mounted. Granted, it was riding a demonic beast, not a horse, but it was clearly giving instructions to surrounding demons which made it an officer-like existence, if not a general.

"...A general-class? You gotta be kidding me!"

Maria recognized the thing instantly. Demons could be separated into different classes and this one was of the highest rank, excelling both in strength and intelligence.

However, in the game that she remembered, this type of enemy would appear towards the latter parts of the arc, when the protagonist would be leading a numerous army in a hunt for recognition.

“That is not a devil!?”

“It’s not! It’s just a demon but of the strongest type!”

“The strongest type!?”

“They come in different ranks like Ogre, Ogre Knight, and General Ogre!”

“Is that so...”

Just like how there were strong and weak humans, demons too had leaders and minions. And like for humans, the presence of a leader would have a huge impact on the battlefield.

“They shouldn’t have appeared yet...”

The appearance of a foe that should not be present until she had reached a higher level shook Maria to the core. In this, she fell victim to her own misconceptions, though. There was no such thing as a “level” in this world. The stronger kinds of enemies appeared now because the human side was powerful enough to warrant their deployment. Devils dispatched general-classes exactly because the Kingdom forces were twenty thousand strong.

“Regardless of that, let us eliminate it. Death of the general is bound to disintegrate the chain of command.”

Lancelot was looking at the battle more calmly than Maria. If the demons were organized just like an army of humans would be, then they should just be dealt with just like one.

First order of business was to stall the enemy offensive to give the knights time to reform ranks, whatever it took to achieve that.

“It seems there are many of them present. Crushing them all at once will be hard.”

It looked like Erwin was also not just watching the spectacle and was actually busy

identifying the enemy commanders.

“And yet we shall manage regardless. Starting with that one.”

Lancelot and the others launched spells at the designated targets. Since successfully taking down the command structure would require killing many more targets, they restricted themselves to intermediate magic.

The mounted demon’s body was suddenly pierced by two spears of water and sliced up by multiple wind blades. It was hard to tell which of the blows was fatal, nevertheless, the enemy fell. And the effect was just like a death of the human leader, the demons that lost their general fell into chaos.

“Alright! One down. The next is that one!”

Lancelot continued the onslaught aiming at a different general-class. But this time his magic did not reach the target.

“Wha!? A defensive magic!?”

A dome-like shield sprung up to protect the demons from the incoming missiles. It was clearly a defensive magic of sorts, even though its elemental affinity was unknown.

“It’s the devil! I’m sure a devil invoked this defensive magic!”

“So, they really have one in there after all...”

“...What’s that!?”

Maria’s question this time did not involve the devil but Rion’s detached force that left the battlefield earlier only to return now with the young Baron at its tip.

“What is happening!?”

Lancelot desperately tried to figure out the reason for that maneuver but he was soon answered by Rion’s word.

“Charge! Our target is that one in the middle!”

Finding their objective, the detached force attacked in order to bring it down.

“Ariel! Keep on the spell barrage!”

Following orders were issued to Ariel. Her position at the back of the troop allowed her to cast a spell after a spell in a rapid manner. All of them crashed on the dome magic protecting the demons one after another.

“The target is inside that circle! Charge!!”

Rion’s and Arnold’s magic began assaulting the demons. That created a gap into which Rion charged without hesitation accompanied by the dragon shaped flames.

Just like before he was executing a forceful, head-on charge but this time he was personally closing in on his target.

“So that is what he was scheming... The bastard!”

Lancelot finally understood that they had all just been used by Rion. Not just their group alone but the whole army was placed in the role of a bait in order to create a gap in the devil’s defense.

And what’s more, Rion even used the devil’s barrier as a mean to pinpoint the enemy’s location, something aided by the spells that his group had fired. None of this was improvised, they had clearly been waiting for this chance while they had been hiding.

Having found himself in a corner, the devil switched from defense to an all-out assault. All his spells, however, were intercepted by Rion’s water element protection.

Using this opportunity both he and Arnold counterattacked with their own magic. This was somehow blocked, but the earth spears shooting up from under his feet were too much for the devil and it found itself pierced and launched into the air.

[R-Rion Frey! As I thought, it was you! Bastard!!!]

Those were the last words of the devil that could be heard. Any further sound was blocked by the howling of the wind circling around its body.

The whirlwind started to grow fiercer, yet more compact. It was pretty obvious why it soon turned blood-red.

The devil died, its body in shreds. The conflict reached conclusion. All that remained was chasing after scattered demons trying to flee following their erstwhile leader's death.

The curtains fell on the Defense of Nyegert.

# Chapter 55

## Maria's Agitation

This time, no celebration was held to commemorate the success of the Nyegert's defense. The overall commander, Crown Marshall, did not want to have one and no one was able to complain about that fact.

Maria and her group shared his mood. Rather than feeling the joy of victory, they were frustrated by being outwitted by Rion and had no desire for a banquet. And Rion himself had never felt the need to socialize anyway. Lack of a celebration party was something he welcomed as it saved him the necessity of inventing excuses not to attend.

But even so, the city's bars were lively and boisterous. Regardless of what their superiors thought, the rank and file were happy to win and live another day.

At the same time, those who didn't feel like celebrating still, of course, had to gather for a meal. That included Maria's group.

The circumstances forbid going out to establishments in the town, not that they ever had any such intention, so they congregated in the mansions of the local feudal lord to partake in the extravagant food on offer.

"...We can't let things go on like this."

Said Maria suddenly after a moment of silence. She was the first one to voice what they all had in their minds.

"I am aware. This is unlikely to be the last battle against the Devils though, we shall definitely earn recognition next time."

"Which is irrelevant. Us not making achievements is not the problem."

"What are you talking about then?"

Although they shared the sentiment of not wanting to let things develop as they

currently were, Maria rejected Lancelot's words.

"If things continue this way, the Demon God might be revived."

"...What did you say?"

Lancelot couldn't help but doubt his ears. The resurrection of the Demon God was synonymous with the kingdom's destruction. Which was exactly what Maria came to this world to prevent.

"The story is developing in the wrong direction. While Rion takes all the achievements, we're unable to do anything. If this carries on, the devils we should be defeating might end up being beyond our reach."

In the end, her intentions were unchanged, she wanted all the merits to go to her group. The reason why she disagreed with Lancelot was simply that she found the idea distasteful when voiced aloud.

"That is... A huge problem, is it not?"

Lancelot didn't say this because he felt alarmed, Maria's words actually reassured him. Understanding her hidden intentions he simply matched her tone to exaggerate the effect. Arnold was sitting at the table with them and this show was all for the Crown Prince's benefit.

"That's right. We have to do something to revert everything back to the original storyline. We have to think of a way to make that happen."

This was also said in consideration of Arnold being here. Maria understood that the current Arnold would not cooperate if she hinted at simply rigging a way of monopolizing all the recognition for their group.

"Should he not just be returned to his territory?"

"Would that alone really be enough?"

Having Rion be removed from the fight against demons was not really that complicated a matter. Although the Crown Prince would most likely be against it, having a feudal lord from a remote region take part in the operations was already odd in the first place.

If they tried to remove Rion from the front lines, the Crown Marshall would certainly be the first to agree. And he wouldn't be the only one. There were many influential people that didn't want Rion to be the only one to raise his name in this endeavor.

However, Maria disagreed with this course of action because she felt that the situation demanded something else.

"Do you have any concerns?"

"Wouldn't he just go and subjugate demons on his own even if he was sent away?"

"No, probably not. All feudal lords are prohibited from taking their retinue beyond the borders of their own territory on their own accord."

Lancelot was lost and couldn't understand what Maria was thinking anymore. So he just refuted her worries in a normal manner.

"What if other lords cooperate with him?"

"That... Would probably make it possible for him to act in such a manner."

But even then, Rion would be limited to the lands in the general area of his fief. The noble not required to join the subjugations wouldn't let retinues from other territories to just pass through their land without the instructions from the Crown. Lancelot was certain of that but he figured there must have been a reason why Maria was fussing over this possibility so much, so he decided to stop completely denying it outright. The two found themselves cooperating very well in this.

"In order to return the story back to its original track, we have to completely remove him from the battles."

"We could just remove him from his position of the feudal lord."

For normal people, this suggestion from Lancelot would be outrageous.

"Lancelot, stop with this foolishness."

And Arnold, incidentally, was pretty much thinking like a normal human being.

"Oh, I know it cannot be done. Just seeing Maria look for a way so hard made me keen

to help and say something stupid without thinking things through.”

It wasn’t as though he said that without giving it a thought. Lancelot was just making sure that the current Arnold was not capable and willing to indulge in unreasonable actions as he had been in the past.

“And it is no less of a problem. You are raising a prospect of taking away the territory of someone who distinguished himself greatly. Such a thing would make our subjects question the sanity of the Crown.”

“I know that. I would not dream of saying such a thing in front of other people.”

“That aside, why do you all feel the need to remove Rion from the fight? Thanks to him, the devil subjugation is proceeding well. I can foresee no problems in the future.”

“Maria just said that things will end badly.”

Lancelot couldn’t come up with any good pretext to justify having Rion sent away from the battlefield.

“Maria?”

“That’s because... Everything’s a little, no, really strange.”

Maria could not come up with anything concrete either. But she had no choice but to explain the problematic points, so she focused on the multiple other tangentially related issues.

“Strange?”

“General-class demons have appeared in the previous battle. However, such strong demons aren’t supposed to appear yet.”

Maria was truly flustered by the fact that the strongest class of demons had appeared in the opening stages of the arc.

“We were able to defeat the devil without any problems despite that.”

“That’s true indeed. But what about the next one? The devils and demons are gradually growing stronger. Even if we barely managed to win this, the next would be

dangerous.”

“...Rion is also still improving.”

In fact, Rion was displeased in how the last battle played out despite the fact that it ended up in a victory. Arnold knew for a fact that the young baron saw many things to improve in regards to his command skills and how his army moved.

And he did not disagree. Even from Arnold’s point of view, Rion’s swordsmanship was poor, even if he had an obvious talent for it.

It was also a fact that all the marching training started to show results.

The Crown Prince had no doubts that Rion still had much room to grow, both as an individual and as a leader.

“That’s not the problem. We are the ones that should be getting stronger.”

“Well, no objections here. We can all just get stronger together, though.”

“But in order for that to happen, we should be the ones to kill the devils.”

“...Maria. I cannot comprehend the meaning of your words.”

“To defeat the last devil we will need at least one strong magician for each of the elements merging their magic. That is us.”

The presence of four comrades attuned to different elements able to merge their magic together was a mandatory condition to win against the last boss. The devils, having obtained power from their god, had an outstanding magical ability and the strongest magic of each element alone would not be enough.

What was required was the ultimate, special technique – the [Fusion]. As far as the game was concerned once they had that, they would be certain to win.

This was why her, Arnold and the other younglings from the Marquess Houses, all five of them, had to be the ones to take all of the achievements. Or at least that was how Maria wanted the situation to look, but Arnold, upon hearing the explanation, thought of another possibility.

“What do you mean by “merging our magic”?”

“By learning about each other’s respective special magic and mixing all the different elements together, we will be able to boost the effectiveness and change their element. And that, of course, is not something anybody can just do.”

She was just now implying that only they were capable of that but Arnold offered an unexpected reply.

“...That sounds just like how Rion uses his magic, though?”

“Eh?”

This was probably one of the best embodiment of the phrase “architect of their own downfall”. Maria had never seen how Rion fights from up close. She had known he could use different elements but she had no idea he could fuse them together.

“Rion’s magic is peculiar. Not only can he use the two elements but he can utilize their effects in order to create ice. And Ariel too seems to be excelling in wind magic. So that is how they were able to raise the effectiveness of their spells so much, huh?”

“...No way.”

To Maria, this was a shocking revelation. Right now she was still unable to use the [Fusion]. She was required to overcome many future events in order to learn that ability.

“So, was that what you mean by “merging them together”?”

“That’s...”

Maria found herself unable to think straight. If she replied affirmatively to Arnold’s question, the worth of her existence would lessen even more. If she tried to deny the truth, it would require an explanation on what exactly was different.

“Maria said that the Fusion is the combination of all four elements. Even if the principles are the same, wouldn’t the effect be different?”

Lancelot took the reins of the conversation. He was determined to stop it veering off into a very bad direction.

“I believe that once Charlotte is included all four elements are present, though?”

In other words, even if all of the people here did not participate, it would still be possible to defeat the last devil. That prospect greatly disturbed not only Maria but also Lancelot and Erwin.

“...Arnold, are you really fine with that? That would make even you... Unnecessary for the devil subjugation. “

“And why would that be bad? As long as the devils are defeated in the end?”

“Well, you are correct, but...”

Lancelot once again tried to ignite the Crown Prince’s jealousy but once again the attempt ended in failure. Arnold was already different from how he was while studying at the Royal Academy.

The case of Vincent had brought his reputation straight to the ground. He was no longer praised as a genius and there were actually people worried about the Kingdom’s future, something that hadn’t happened for a long time before that.

At first, that had made him heavily depressed and brought him to the verge of despair. But at one point he had suddenly realized that he no longer needed to push himself in order to be the wise Crown Prince that everyone had seen in him before. That flash of insight had made him feel relieved, relaxed and as if the range of his vision expanded. It had been also the reason why he had been able to rise from his inner chaos

The Arnold of today had no desire to be the greatest anymore. His heart now had the flexibility to accept that there were others that were better than him and even capacity to think of how to utilize them.

Which was exactly the mindset needed by those destined to govern and a proof that the present Crown Prince was indeed wise.

“The Devil’s menace is an important matter for this Kingdom. Should we not tackle it by pooling all our strength?”

Even though he said that, everyone present knew that Arnold was not far from a conclusion that it would be fine to leave all the things to Rion. And that was something the other three would never acknowledge.

“It would be good indeed if those feelings of Your Highness reached everybody, but...”

At this point, Erwin, so far taciturn and tight-lipped, spoke himself. He felt he finally found the start of a thread that might lead to getting rid of Rion.

“...What are you saying?”

“Will Your Highness not mind, even if what I have to say is a bit rude?”

“Go ahead.”

“Well then. Is there not a grudge that the Freys hold towards Your Highness? Is it not heavy enough that they might desire revenge in the future?”

“That...”

Arnold was aware that he was being resented. After all, at first, Rion wouldn't even listen to anything he said.

“I feel worry seeing someone like that is standing at Your Highness' side. And I fear such a person obtaining, and then using, unnecessary power from merit he does not need to gain.”

Seeing Arnold's reaction, Erwin continued to speak. He was purposefully raising the danger presented by Rion in order to get rid of him.

“...”

Arnold could not refute those words. If the couple truly bore a grudge, it would be natural to expect them to think of revenge. And he was perfectly aware his past deeds had warranted that.

“I think those two are dangerous. It is my understanding that he was made a lord of a remote region was in order to soften his anger about the handling of Vincent's case while not providing him with too much power.”

This was actually far from reality but at present the exact circumstances were irrelevant. Erwin just wanted to stir up the Crown Prince sense of threat by any and all reason.

“It is as Erwin says and I agree. That man is dangerous.”

Seeing the situation head into a favorable direction again, Lancelot jumped on board of Erwin’s argument. It carried a strong power of persuasion because Rion resenting the Crown Prince was a known fact.

“...Both of you are right.”

“What are you going to do then?”

“As I thought, trying to avoid that subject was wrong. I knew I should have talked with them about that matter.”

“Arnold?”

The answer that came from Arnold’s lips was entirely different to what they were expecting.

“I know that matter is not something easily resolved. Nevertheless, it is no reason to avoid it. I guess we can discuss and work it out step by step.”

“...Discuss?”

Despite their intention to separate the two, the conspirators ended up bringing Rion and Arnold closer.

“I shall just go and ask Charlotte where they are right now. My apologies everyone, I have to excuse myself.”

On top of everything, Arnold was planning to act on his decision promptly. To the point of immediately interrupting their meal time together.

“N-No, that...”

Lancelot, perplexed by the sudden development, could only stare helplessly as the Crown Prince left the dining room. There was a rift between Arnold and Rion. However, the distance between them was not as large as Lancelot and the others had thought.

“...A huge failure. huh?”

“Like you can judge. All this happened because you raised the idea of Rion’s threat.”

“And Sir Lancelot backed that up, did you not?”

“I did not expect Arnold to say... That.”

“I guess something must have happened while they were marching together. That’s why I said we should have accompanied him.”

Erwin flagged up the risk of averting their eyes off from the danger. Lancelot and Maria overruled him and right now all he had in his mind was “I told you so”.

“Are you trying to say we would have earned some achievements had we done that?”

“That I cannot say for certain.”

“Then how can you state that we were wrong?”

“How? What do you think is going to happen now? What will it make us if the Crown Prince turns that man into his ally?”

“Us? What us? Did you mean to say, “me”?”

“What did you say?”

“The one to be troubled the most if Arnold and Rion become closer is you. After all, you might lose the position of the heir of House Windhill to the child of those two.”

“...”

Lancelot had just given voice to what Erwin feared the most. Even though speaking that out loud resolved nothing. Truthfully, Lancelot was afraid as well. Without his relationship with Arnold his position in the race for inheritance weakened too and he was simply picking on Erwin to hide his fears.

“Instead of fighting pointlessly, we should think of something.”

Maria interrupted the imminent spat. This was indeed no time for them to be fighting against themselves. For her the events were pointing to a worst possible scenario. Her dream of being the Queen was under threat and she considered that a very serious

matter

“Even if you say that, with Arnold being like this we can hardly do anything.”

“It’s not like we’re limited to relying on him. There should be other avenues available for us.”

“Beside Arnold? Just who are you trying to move?”

Even though he was the heir of a Marquess House, Lancelot did not have that many connections to call on. If he tried to use his family’s resources again and failed once more, he would not be forgiven so he had to act with caution.

“I expect there to be many people wishing to remove Rion from the war, we just need to approach them.”

“I know that. But did you not say yourself that this alone would not be enough?”

“I only said that returning him to his territory won’t be enough. We need to strip him of his strength first.”

“What do you mean?”

“His army, obviously. We will take the Bandeaux Army from him.”

“That cannot possibly be done.”

“We don’t know until we try. Think about this. It’s not as though Rion is good at commanding. His true strength is that army that fights for him. So we’re going to steal it and make it our own. And once that is done, we’re certain to achieve much in the upcoming battles.”

“...That is...”

For the first time in their relationship Maria showed Lancelot her real, wicked side and that astonished the young lord greatly. But she no longer felt she had the luxury of hiding it.

“Moreover, no matter how you think about it, that army of his really belongs to us. Do those four colors on their armor not represent the four elements? Should we not lead

the groups that fit our attribute? Don't you think that just sounds cool?"

"Y-Yeah. However, I am convinced we still need Arnold to make that come true."

"His cooperation or lack of one doesn't matter. He is a person bound by his position, no longer allowed to move to his heart's desire. The problem is Charlotte. We need to do something about that woman."

"...We need to pull Arnold back to our side."

"That won't be as interesting anymore. Doesn't that woman have any older or younger brothers? We really need to have her recalled and replace her with the heir of the house."

"That is not an option. Her brother is not nearly old enough to head to the battlefield."

"Is that so... Then, we have no choice. I don't want to use it but I guess it's time to pull out my trump card."

"Trump card?"

"That woman has a secret. She might be earnest on the surface but away from people's eyes she had done very many terrible things."

Maria's trump card was the truth about the chastisements she had experienced. She was not the type to just let someone bully her and get away with it.

"...Is that so."

Although he was curious for more details on the subject, Lancelot found the topic scary and he did not pry more. In that, he was right in a way. Knowing the truth would reveal that Maria deceived all of them and had, in fact, full knowledge that Ariel was not the real mastermind behind her chastisements.

But then again, since he had already seen Maria's wicked side, he would just acknowledge that as a matter of the past.

"Rion is standing out too much. And the nails that stand out get hammered, you know? We will use those who consider him a nuisance to remove him from the war. And we can just say that we need the experience that his army represents. As long as Rion is a

bother, if we just choose the right person any excuse will work.”

“You are right.”

“Erwin, did you catch all that? Stop just sitting there, brooding, you need to act too.”

“...Yeah.”

The reason why Maria had shown them her wicked side was because she knew that they already reached a point at which they could no longer distance themselves from her. And her guess was correct. Regardless of what kind of woman Maria truly was, neither Lancelot nor Erwin could refuse to cooperate with her anymore. In fact, they would act more assertively to make her schemes come true.

# Chapter 56

## Unnoticed Desires

With the post-battle review conference regarding the defense of Nyegert over, Rion and Ariel planned to spend some time together. Ultimately though, they had to shelve those plans due to Charlotte's presence and all three of them ended up having lunch together. Because they had researched the reputable restaurants prior to the battle they did not have to pick one at random like any other person in the town for the first time would.

It had been a simple trick by Rion in order to make the soldiers believe that they would certainly win thereby doubling their performance.

However, even though they were presently in that pre-selected establishment, Rion was still brooding over some thoughts in silence. He had hardly touched the food he had been served and didn't have the tiniest bit of festive mood in his bearing despite their victory.

"...Now there, just what may you be thinking about?"

Ariel might have been used to those moods of his, but Charlotte definitely wasn't. There was a hint of displeasure in her voice. She had expected there would be time for more personal conversations now that the battle was over, yet here he was being like this. She couldn't really hold back any longer.

"I hope that Charlotte is aware that Rion hates selfish women?"

This question by Ariel made Charlotte think "You're the one to talk" but she held her tongue.

"What could you possibly mean? I was just hoping to talk with him for a bit."

"I see. Unfortunately Bandeaux is pretty poor at present."

"...What does that have to do with anything?"

Charlotte was clearly bewildered by Ariel's arbitrary remark.

"The barony cannot afford to maintain an official concubine."

The reply was straightforward, astonishing and delivered with a smile on Ariel's face.

"...I-I w-wish for nothing of the sort. This is not a subject I wished to discuss with Rion."

"Oh? Did I ever say all this was about Charlotte?"

"..."

Charlotte was being poked fun at by Ariel who was even younger than her.

"...Miss Charlotte."

Rion spoke up without minding the girls' conversation. Well, to be exact it was less "not minding" and more "not paying any attention", he had been too lost in his own thoughts.

"Ah, what is the matter?"

Charlotte answered sounding upset. She completely ignored Ariel's stern stare and focused entirely at Rion.

"That woman said that the devils and demons have gotten stronger, right?"

"...True. She certainly did."

Learning that Rion's chosen subject was Maria made Charlotte visibly displeased.

"Did she say anything about the demons we faced just now?"

"She was clearly surprised. It seems that the demons were stronger than she expected."

"Is that so... The subjugation war is far from over, right?"

"Heavens, this topic bores me to death. I am not here to discuss those matters and if you are so insistent on asking questions anyway, do ask about me instead."

“Eh?”

Rion was bewildered from witnessing Charlotte’s selfish behavior directly for the first time. Ariel, on the other hand, was radiating mirth while holding a hand up to her face. She was poking fun at the older girl again by trying to suggest she was struggling to hold back laughter after what she had just heard.

“...Erm.”

Charlotte’s mind turned blank. She had absolutely no idea how could she have done what she just had and what on earth could prompt her to do it.

“Ahem, so what questions should I ask about Miss Charlotte?”

“A-ah. N-No, n-nevermind that. R-right, about that woman. She did say such things before.”

“Is that so...”

“Listen, could you at least tell me why are you so worked up about this subject?”

“Ah, I guess I should. I was just thinking that the demons were rather high in number and of strong varieties even though this conflict is just starting.”

“Is that so?”

In Charlotte’s eyes the last battle was pretty much a perfect victory, even if Rion seemed to be displeased with the outcome. She did not expect him to have those kind of thoughts with this kind of result.

“It was on my mind before, but recent events exceeded even my expectations. If the number and quality of demons keep increasing at the current rate, just what are we going to face in the latter stages? It would be really hard to face hordes of several hundred thousand.”

The strength of enemies would increase in line with Maria’s war potential. This was Rion’s initial hypothesis. However, he was now certain that the numbers just now had been too high.

“That is a given. Sadly I know little of those matters.”

“So you agree with me? I wonder if that woman knows something? Because it seems to me she does not share this view.”

Rion knew that the devil subjugations were in-game events and that was exactly why he was having doubts. This being a game, the enemies were certain to grow stronger, something Maria herself had confirmed in the past. But it wasn't immediately obvious that she and her group were growing their skill proportionally to the threat. Rion knew that there were no levels in this world and the only way to improve was honest dedication to training.

“...Why do you think so?”“

Charlotte didn't even imagine the things Rion was thinking about. To no surprise whatsoever Maria wouldn't tell anyone this was a game world.

“I'm just guessing here, but that woman has never looked like she has thought even a slightest chance of defeat possible, has she?”

“Now that I think about it, that is correct. I also feel the same thing from her.”

“Is it something she knows about the prospects of victory or is she just not giving the alternatives any thought?”

Maria was in possession of the game knowledge and Rion thought she might be keeping a secret trump card up her sleeve. But there was a necessity for a contingency plan in case she had nothing. While he did wish her a bad ending, he did not want himself or Ariel to be dragged into that mess.

“Pardon for the intrusion, may I have a moment of your time.”

“Prince Arnold?”

Charlotte was surprised by the sudden appearance of Arnold. She did tell him the restaurant's location but she didn't expect that he would really come.

“...Is there something wrong?”

Rion did not actually ignore him this time. He had noticed Arnold's arrival from the start but, for a while, pretended to not to know that the Crown Prince was here. He wished for the royal to hesitate on calling upon them and just go back on his own way

but, predictably, such a thing did not happen.

“I would like to talk to Arie- no, with your wife, if possible.”

“...Go ahead.”

Rion frowned. He couldn't figure out the intention behind Arnold's sudden desire to talk to his former fiancée at this point of time.

“In private, if you would be so kind.”

“Huh?”

This was even more unexpected and Rion looked stunned without even trying to conceal that fact.

“Ah, do not misunderstand, please. It is not a serious matter, just a question I would ask her”

Arnold knew what Rion was likely suspecting right now, so he tried to brush away any potential misunderstanding.

“...It is not serious, yet you still have to talk to her alone?”

“For now, at least. In the future I would like to broach the subject with you as well, when the time is right.”

“Is that so... If Ariel doesn't mind, I won't complain either. But I would appreciate if you talked somewhere I will be able to see what is going on.”

Rion agreed after a pause for thought. He knew that Arnold was not the type to set up traps with straightforward and earnest requests.

“Shall we, my lady?”

Hearing Rion's words, Arnold turned to Ariel with his next question...

“It is fine. I do not mind.”

Ariel replied without hesitation. She was curious about what Arnold wanted to talk

about after all this preamble.

“...In that case, may I suggest the table there?”

Arnold pointed to a table considerably distant from where the Freys were seating. It was far enough to prevent the conversation from being overheard but still in plain sight of everybody – a perfect place in light of Rion’s request.

Ariel rose from her seat and followed the Prince to the location indicated where both of them sat down face-to-face.

“And thus the positions have reversed, have they not?”

Watching all this unfold Charlotte couldn’t stop herself volunteering an observation with a teasing look in her eyes.

“Positions?”

“Compared to the Academy days, it is now your turn to be the jealous one, is it not?”

She brought this up because the whole situation reminded her of when the two of them had been talking about Arnold’s feelings.

“Ah. That’s right, we did have that kind of conversation before, didn’t we?”

Rion also recalled that incident from the past. That event had been something that had prompted him to consider separating from Ariel for a while and he did not look back at that time fondly.

“How about it? Do you now understand his feelings from back then?”

“No, I do not feel jealousy. I’m just worried that he might try something.”

“...Is that so.”

Charlotte understood that, even though they had finally managed to talk to each other, Rion’s feelings regarding the Crown Prince didn’t really change. This made her slightly disappointed.

“Shouldn’t Miss Charlotte be feeling jealous, though?”

“Oh, I am fine. I do not hold the same feelings anymore.”

“Is that the case?”

It was his first time hearing that. Rion had thought all this time that Charlotte was with them for the Crown Prince’s sake.

“It is. I find it regrettable considering the things I have done in the past, but I cannot deny the truth.”

“Oh, I get it!”

“Eh? Huh?”

The surprise made Charlotte’s heart throb

“There is someone else in your heart, right?”

Rion asked with delight. Hearing this from him, Charlotte could only smile bitterly.

“...Yes, although that person happens to be terribly dense.”

This conversation helped her make sense of her own feelings. And of the growing irritation at Rion who was blissfully oblivious to them.

“Hmm, that’s quite rough.”

“...And you are still the same.”

Finally having a firm grasp on her heart, she despaired at Rion’s denseness.

“Eh? In what way?”

“Heavens, I don’t know how to talk to you anymore!”

“E-Eh? What is it? Did I, perhaps, say something bad?”“

“You did, and it was something really terrible.”

“...I have not the slightest idea what could that be.”

“And that is an aggravating factor. Honestly, you are a hopeless case, are you not?”

“...Why?”

“But I guess if that is true, then so am I.”

Charlotte was, by now, perfectly aware that all this time she had been searching for a man like Rion. However, she had never expected that she would actually fall in love with the actual person.

Hence, she faced unwelcome thoughts about why did she again end up chasing after a love that would never end up fulfilled. She could not imagine Rion having feelings for women other than Ariel and that exact aspect of him was what she fancied most.

“I guess that makes both of us idiots.”

“...So very true. I guess we really are the same.”

But even so, she desired to enjoy this moment to the fullest. This alone brought happiness to Charlotte. Admittedly, she would never be his number one. However, she was certain that no woman in the world but Ariel could talk to Rion like she had been.

And it was not her own private delusion – in the eyes of the outsiders, their discussion looked just like a couple’s banter, something that raised smiles on the faces of people watching.

But there was an exception, someone who felt only displeasure by seeing those two like this. Ariel.

“D-do not fret, we shall be done soon enough.”

Arnold was well aware what was the source of Ariel’s displeasure, after all, it was obvious enough. She had been glaring in Rion and Charlotte’s direction this whole time.

“...Fine, what does Your Highness wish to talk about?”

To Ariel, who wanted to return to her seat as fast as possible, the faster the conversation ended, the better. Which was why she was proactive and cooperating.

“...Now that I think about it, it has been quite a while since we last sat face-to-face like this.”

“This is Your Highness’ business?”

Ariel’s stare became icy in an instant. She had no wish for an idle chat.

“No, by no means, I just tried to relax the mood before moving to the crux of the matter.”

“Does Your Highness really think that I can be placated by small-talk?”

“Ah... It is just that my topic and our past are not entirely unrelated.”

“...I guess I cannot argue that.”

The only thing the two could talk about like this was their past. So, for the time being, Ariel suppressed her displeasure.

“Does my lady perhaps harbor a grudge against me?”

“...I wonder how am I even supposed to answer that, Highness?”

Although she did resent him, he was still the Crown Prince. Being in the position she found herself in, there was absolutely no way she would admit to her true feelings regarding a member of the royal family.

“I am not asking this as the Crown Prince. Then again, I guess I am posing this question exactly because I am the heir.”

Arnold came here to ascertain Ariel’s true motives but he could not put his intentions into words very well. Predictably, once they sat down to it, it proved a pretty difficult topic to discuss.

“This conversation would go much easier if Your Highness presented his intentions clearly.”

But Ariel had no time for subtleties or sensibilities of the Prince, she wanted the conversation concluded fast.

“...You are right, of course. What you shall hear from now on will come from this Kingdom’s Crown Prince. It is not something Arnold as an individual can discuss.”

“I am listening, Highness”

“Alright. It is obvious and expected that you would resent me, I shall not waste our time in pointlessly asking for forgiveness. Getting your husband entangled in that feud, though, is something I would like you to reconsider.”

“...Getting Rion entangled?”

This was not a question Ariel had ever thought to ponder and she couldn’t quite figure out where Arnold was going with this.

“Do you not think it would be unfortunate to have his talent unfulfilled because of a grudge he might hold against me?”

“...Eh?”

She did not expect this. She now saw the deeper meaning behind Arnold’s words, even if she still required more time to fully process all the implications. So even if she disagreed with him, she now knew where the Crown Prince was going with this.

“I believe Rion has already displayed his talent.”

“That he did. I’d say he is also employing it for the wrong purpose, would you not agree?”

“Wrong purpose... How exactly is his purpose wrong, I wonder?”

Ariel herself couldn’t make out the final goal of her husband’s schemes. She decided to use the chance to find out more and test how much thought had Arnold put into the subject.

“Take the last battle. He did not simply aim for personal glory, he aimed at denying it to anyone else. If he continues like this, he is likely to earn much merit and corresponding status, ultimately a very high position with both power and influence. And yet he would probably not have the kingdom’s best interests at heart. How could he when the future monarch will be me.”

“..”

That was spot on and, in truth, she did expect that by working closely with Rion the Prince would be able to figure out her husband's motives. Arnold's observation was not surprising, still, she found herself unable to reply.

“Is he planning to employ that position in his revenge against me, perhaps? That would cost him everything he gained. And everything he would stand to gain in the future.”

“...That possibility is hard to deny.”

Even if Rion was able to kill the Crown Prince, he would still end up as the enemy of the whole kingdom. Both of them had resolved themselves for that future. But now that she found herself discussing this subject again, and not just in the context of her own fate, Ariel couldn't prevent her determination be shaken a bit.

And the Prince's next words made her feelings lurch in a completely different direction.

“I hope you shall not take a slight at me asking this, but was that really what Vincent wished for?”

“...There's no way someone like you would be able to understand my brother's feelings!”

Ariel stood up in anger, scowling at Arnold. Just being told to rein one's anger wasn't enough for her to make that possible, especially when such a question was asked by the person chiefly responsible for her brother's death.

“The fault is mine, but do listen for a while longer. I have been thinking about that incident all this time and not just about my role in it, but about Vincent too.”

“...So what?”

“Vincent, in the end, did not try to escape his fate. I would not doubt his loyalty towards the Crown was an important factor, but I do not believe it was the sole reason.”

“...Do carry on, Highness.”

Although her anger had not really subsided, Ariel sat down. She never had the chance to learn much about her brother's final moments and now, faced with one, she decided to take it.

"Pondering this, I arrived at one hypothesis – what if Vincent behaved like this in order to set Rion free?"

"Eh?"

"Keeping in mind Rion's skill, a successful escape was very likely. But that would condemn him to a whole life on the run, one with no future. Would it be strange for Vincent not to wish that on his... friend?"

"Brother..."

Even though the idea came from the lips of the hateful Arnold, it was so very much like her brother that Ariel couldn't reject it. This kind of attitude was exactly why Ariel loved her brother so much and why Rion served him from the bottom of his heart.

The words of the Crown Prince rang true and the moment Ariel admitted that fact, tears began flowing down her cheeks. They were prompted by an odd mixture of happiness, sadness, and nostalgia.

"And so we yet again arrive at the question – would Vincent wish that Rion throw away his whole life for the sake of revenge?"

"..."

This time there was no rage in her, still, she was unwilling to offer affirmation to his question. Were she to honestly speak her mind, she would admit that her desire for revenge against Arnold was considerably weaker than in the past anyhow. Not because she had let go of the grudge, but because she thought it was highly likely that Rion was a child of the Queen. And if that was true, she wouldn't ever want him to end up killing his own brother.

However, Arnold wasn't the sole target of revenge, there were also Maria, Erwin, and Lancelot. She saw no reason to let them off, yet moving against them would bring about the enmity of the kingdom too.

"I do not expect an immediate answer, but my lady, please, do think about this."

“...I shall, Highness.”

“I see... Thank goodness for that.”

For the time being, Arnold felt relieved that Ariel agreed to give the matter a thought. He was really tense during this conversation and fully aware that this topic was not something he should have broached if not for his position.

His face finally relaxed. If just for a moment.

“So tell me, please, how does talking about nothing really serious end up making someone else’s wife cry? I can see now why you didn’t want me present at the table.”

Rion’s whole body was oozing bloodlust and he was barely able to keep a respectful manner of speech.

“A-Ah no, no, you misunderstand. I am not the one at fault for this.”

“Who else other than you? I would really like an explanation now, why did you make my wife shed tears?”

“All this is a great misunderstanding. Ariel may be crying as a result of our conversation, but it was all done with you in mind.”

“There is no need for you to think of me. I will think about myself on my own.”

“...Oh, absolutely, please do that. Instead of acting for the sake of the people at all times, do sometimes think of yourself.”

“Eh?”

Those words of Arnold had completely taken Rion by surprise, the bloodlust forgotten in the sudden confusion.

“While a life dedicated to others is not necessarily bad per se, I am of the belief that one should never forget one’s own life comes first. Please, do think about this, even for once. This, incidentally, is what I have talked about with your wife.”

“...Have you now.”

“And, with this, my business here is concluded. Let us meet tomorrow- ah, next time would be likely in the capital, huh? In that case, until then.”

Saying this, Arnold left the restaurant. From Rion’s point of view, he had just escaped without really explaining anything.

“Ari? What was all that about?”

“I wonder? It seems like Rion was lectured. Maybe His Highness wishes for a younger brother?”

Ariel replied casually hinting at the truth.

“Ah? Even if that’s the case, wouldn’t it be weird for that guy to choose me?”

Still, the thick-headed Rion would not be able to notice subtle hints like this. It was his talent to be dense in all matters regarding himself and those who knew him very well wanted to do something for him exactly because they were worried about that side of his. Rion was sharp, yet clueless. Charming, yet frightening. That kind of duality was one of his greatest charms.

# Chapter 57

## A Moment of Respite

Rion always caused people around him to worry in one way or another and the number of those afflicted by that state just increased by one. This time the victim was Sol, the royal guard. He had always maintained a sense of distance from Rion, even though they had fought together in battle.

If asked, he would not be able to give a reason why did he behave that way. If forced to answer regardless, all he would be able to say was that he feared that getting too close to Baron Frey would destroy something he had protected all this time. And even to him, that excuse sounded really stupid.

However, despite trying to keep the distance, Sol never stopped the surveillance.

His conclusion was that in regards to talent alone, Rion was superior in all aspects. His swordsmanship might be nowhere near great, but it was unmistakably improving. He had displayed an overwhelming skill in magic. And even as a commander, he was so excellent that if he joined the kingdom's military, he would be an easy appointment for a leader of thousands. Finally, on top of giving a vibe that he could effortlessly command armies, the retinue he was commanding right now would be more difficult to handle in a war than any of those armies could ever be.

However, there was obviously more to the man called Rion than just his abilities and Sol struggled to describe what that was in simple, succinct terms. If he tried to frame that nicely, he would say that the youth is an exciting and interesting person to be around. If he were not to do him any favors, he'd just describe Rion as so reckless that one couldn't bear watching.

This appraisal was not really accurate. Sol's assessment of Rion was a way for the guardsman to mask his real feelings. Because while he might indeed be that reckless, you just couldn't stop yourself from lending him a hand. That would be the accurate opinion.

There was no way Sol would accept this kind of feeling in his heart. He had long ago decided on whom he should serve and he felt very strongly about that subject.

And thus, without knowing that the person he wished to serve and the person he refused to serve were one and the same, he was about to bear witness to Rion's recklessness yet again.

Because on the first day of the return journey to the capital, Rion had started something undeniably stupid.

"...Are you serious?"

"There's nothing a demon can do that a human cannot."

"You are obviously mistaken. It's exactly because they are demons that they can control the demonic beasts."

"You're the one that's mistaken. Demons and demonic beasts are clearly two different things. Demonic beasts are merely animals that are a bit violent."

"Are you trying to say that... this... is "just a bit"?"

Sol's gaze wandered towards a demonic beast bound by numerous ropes. In theory, that should severely restrict it, but as if the presence of restraints was irrelevant, that demonic beast was rampaging in an attempt to break free.

As for what Rion was trying to do to with that demonic beast, he was trying to imitate a demon that used one of those as a mount.

"Normal animals rampage too when restricted. Looks like they're the same after all."

"...How could you possibly arrive at that conclusion? I can't understand you at all."

"You and I are different. It's only natural for you to not understand me. Now then, no time for chit-chat, got to get on with this."

Saying this, Rion got close to the demonic beast showing no outward signs of fear. This was something that Sol could not comprehend. True, the demon's outer appearance was horse-like. But the thing had a horn growing out of its head and a nasty set of sharp fangs lining its mouth. It was also jet black and whenever it opened its mouth the crimson thus revealed made it gain a grotesque vibe.

And Rion was trying to ride that beast. The man couldn't possibly be sane.

“Now then, let’s start.... Or so I would like to say, but how?”

Rion, not really sure how to proceed, paused to think for a moment after getting close to the beast. He might have been extremely well prepared when it came to moving his army, but, in Sol’s experience, he always fell short when faced with a problem like this.

“As an aside, why won’t you show gratitude for having your wounds healed, eh?”

Rion asked the demonic beast directly. But while it was true this particular being was saved by Rion once it succumbed to wounds in battle, Sol did not think it would either remember that fact or understand human speech.

And sure enough, the demonic beast showed no signs of willingness to behave.

“...Alright, let’s try with food then. If you want this meat, let me ride you.<sup>[1]</sup>”

A lump of meat suddenly appeared in Rion’s hands making Sol wonder whether he had prepared for this beforehand. He talked to the demonic beast while presenting the meat in front of it, an astonishing idea in itself. Sol knew from experience that a normal animal could be tamed with food, but it took more than a single attempt to get anywhere.

“Ah!?”

Suddenly, Rion shouted in surprise while the meat he was holding was flung into the air. Exploiting Rion’s lack of caution the creature reached out with its horn and hooked the meat up, making sure it fell at its feet before consuming it promptly.

“Son of a bitch. Getting full of yourself when people are trying to be nice. If that’s what you want, then I’ll make you submit by force.”

While people around wondered what he meant, Rion unexpectedly cut all the ropes restricting the beast with his sword without paying any mind to anybody present.

“Don’t try to escape. Let’s settle this fair and square.”

People watching, Sol included, thought this was a futile thing to say, but, surprisingly, the creature faced Rion without trying to run as if it understood everything.

And that was how the fight between the demonic beast and Rion had started.

It charged at him, horn swinging, but he splendidly evaded each and every jab. His ability to defend was considerable and dodging the horn was just like avoiding swords.

When it showed an opening once again, he slipped into close distance straight next to its bust. The beast reared to crush him under its hooves and he dodged using the chance to get onto its back.

“Alright!”

Moments after those words were said the demonic beast kicked with its rear legs so high that it resembled a person doing a handstand and launched Rion into the air. This was followed up by another attempt at trampling which he managed to avoid with a long jump backward.

“...To think it would still resist. How am I supposed to win when it's like that?”

No one but the beast knew the answer to this half-muttered question and it had no way or inclination to offer it.

“Whatever, even if that's the case I'll make you my horse at all cost.”

Instead of giving up, Rion ended up getting fired up more. Seeing this development the clansmen knew that their Lord's stubbornness had just been ignited and they all sat on the ground resigned to witness an inevitable war of attrition. Seeing that, the Royal Guard squires followed their lead.

And a battle of attrition was exactly what unfolded before their eyes. Many, many times did Rion manage to slip through the attacks of the demonic beast and mount its back. Every one of those times the creature would buckle to try, and succeed, to throw him off. Despite that, Rion never gave up, repeating the whole process again, again and again.

“How long is this supposed to continue?”

“Until Lord Rion is satisfied, I guess. We might not be able to travel any further today.”

Sol's question was answered by Kiel.

“Then we will not make to our destination on time.”

“We will. Lord Baron, as usual, has a perfect grip on the schedule, however it may look from the side.”

“So you expect the training to continue on the way back?”

What Kiel was saying was that the marching practice would be in effect again while they traveled back to the capital.

“Milord doesn’t seem to be satisfied with our movements, why would you expect him to stop the training?”

“...I see your point.”

He would continue until he was satisfied. He had always been that way with everything. And with that being the case, the current battle, as Kiel had said, was unlikely to end anytime soon. Sol knew from fighting at Rion’s side that the youth had more than enough stamina for that.

However, this time both of them guessed incorrectly.

“...Let’s stop for now. You have not completely recovered from your wounds yet, have you? Winning against you in this state...”

after saying this, Rion really did end the battle and started to walk back into camp. With his back completely exposed to the demonic beast.

“Lord Rion!?”

Unsurprisingly, even Kiel would be flustered by this turn of events. Just because Rion had stopped didn’t mean that the demonic beast would stop too, it would be normal to expect it to continue.

“...No way.”

However, the beast didn’t try to attack Rion. It didn’t even try to run away.

“Get ready to set off.”

Rion started to issue instructions without showing any signs of paying attention to the astonishment of people present.

“Milord?”

“Yes, Kiel?”

“What should we do with that demonic beast? Should we restrain it with ropes again?”

“Ah, no, that would be unreasonable. You would just injure it more and the contest of strength wouldn’t be fair, with one side restricted.”

It wasn’t as though Rion had given up. He had just called time on the matter for today.

“But how are we supposed to keep it?”

Common sense dictated that a demonic beast left unrestricted was certain to escape and there would be no rematch even if Rion wished for one. He was having none of that, though.

“I think it will come back to challenge me once it heals properly.”

“...How can you be so sure of that?”

“The eyes of this beast were responding to my words, it very likely understands human speech.”

“A demonic beast that understands people?”

“Would it really be so strange if some of them were capable of the feat? Well, to be fair I cannot be certain, but that’s the feeling I’m getting from it.”

“Haa.”

Demonic beasts that could understand human language actually existed. And that fact would be proven over the next several days because just as Rion had predicted the creature had indeed returned of its own volition.

Once that happened, the two resumed their intense contest clashing repeatedly over the few following days. And somewhere towards the latter parts of that period, it stopped looking like an actual fight and everybody could swear Rion was simply playing with the thing.

Eventually, Rion managed to mount the creature and stay on its back while riding all around the camp. He was soon joined by Ariel, a fact that reminded everyone how alike the two of them were.

And thus, the young baron was able to achieve his goal of gaining a demonic beast as a mount. For a moment.

“Why did you set it free?”

Rion had set the demonic beast free once they got close to the capital and Sol was curious why.

“What do you mean? It’s not like it was captured, right?”

“True, but weren’t you planning to use it as a mount?”

“At first, but I have reconsidered since then.”

“Which is why I’m asking, what made you reconsider?”

Sol repeated his inquiry, irritated by Rion’s reticence.

“It’s impossible to keep Nightmare just tied down.”

“Nightmare?”

“That’s her name. Doesn’t it sound cool?”

“...I don’t get it.”

“Boring. You’re the wrong person to discuss this with.”

Sol failed to see the point in naming the beast, not the meaning of the name itself, but his remark failed to communicate the distinction.

“Anyhow, it can’t really be stabled and it would be unreasonable to let it roam freely. That’s just asking for someone to confuse it with a demonic beast and try to kill it.”

“What do you mean “confuse”? It is a demonic beast.”

“...It would be bad if it gets mistaken for a stray one.”

It didn't have to be said that non-stray demonic beasts did not exist.

“That is unavoidable, it's still a dangerous creature, right?”

“Did Nightmare assault anyone here even once?”

“...No.”

“Then, it's clearly not dangerous. It may be a different matter when it's angered, but that would be the fault of whoever aggravates it.”

“...If you consider this that important, why not make it clear that the demonic beast belongs to you? Setting it free here doesn't eliminate the possibility of it being hunted down.”

To Sol, Rion's insistence on covering for his new pet was akin to a child trying to justify his selfish whim, so he offered this suggestion without a second thought.

“...You sure say good things sometimes.”

“Haa?”

“It'll need a proof that it is mine. A collar, maybe? Nightmare dislikes collars, though. But what if I got one with really cool ornaments...”

Finding Sol's suggestion acceptable, Rion began to consider what to do to make it clear that the beast was his. Which made it impossible to talk to him until he managed to collect his thoughts, something Sol was by now aware of after seeing it many times before.

“Haa..... Sometimes it's really hard to say whether your husband is really an adult or a child, milady.”

Their conversation unilaterally terminated, Sol complained to Ariel instead.

“Rion is still a child.”

“This is, in the end, a conclusion I arrived at myself recently. Even if he's a completely

different person when performing his duties.”

In his eyes, once the battle was over, Rion had changed into a completely different person. Unbeknownst to him, every clansman present actually thought the same.

“That is because my husband is tired.”

“That is not surprising, in hindsight. Compared to others, he works very hard.”

“It is Rion’s heart that is exhausted, being always on guard when interacting with people. Rion trusts very few individuals and likely finds dealing with a demonic beast much easier. After all the creature does not conceal its true motives.”

“That’s.....”

“And yet, Rion is still burdened with the responsibility for victory. If the Crown mistrusts my husband so much, it should just stop relying on him. Rion is not exactly here because he wants to be involved.”

Ariel was angry. Rion was exposing his innocence to others because the recent battle had been so intense it left him no space to pay attention to others. He hadn’t just been thinking of preventing others from getting the glory, he had been weighed down by his pledge of not repeating the mistakes of the past. Trying to fight in a way that prevented bystanders from becoming victims had been an overwhelming pressure on his shoulders. And he was being crushed by it.

Rion was still a child. Those words carried all the fury she felt at the people who made this child carry such a heavy burden. As well as her own worry that she might add to that burden herself.

“Sol might have lost the person to serve but can you really say that you are suffering? Rion had been on the receiving end of so many hideous things that he cannot find in himself the will to trust others anymore. And yet, he still craves for people he can trust in, like my brother, to whom he had dedicated his entire soul.”

“I...”

“Sol, though? Does Sol really seek a person like that too? Getting to know Rion, I somehow struggle to believe that.”

“..”

Sol couldn't find words to reply. He did, of course, wish to reject the accusation. Still, what had he exactly done to demonstrate his desire to find the person he was looking for? Frankly, the only thing he could bring up with any confidence was how he had lamented that the princess was lost to him.

What was he compared to Rion? The youth's Lord might have died, but that only spurred him to act for his sake all the harder. While likely grieving with equal strength as revealed by Ariel's anger.

“Ari.”

Rion who, by all accounts, should've been locked in thought had suddenly called Ariel's name.

“Yes Rion?”

“That's embarrassing.”

“Oh?”

“It's really embarrassing when you say that to other people.”

“...I wonder if Sol knows, there is that thing I said to Rion when I first met him.”

However Ariel understood Rion's words, it made her suddenly change the track of her conversation with Sol.

“Ari?”

“Back then, and many times since, I have told Rion that his eyes are beautiful. And whenever I have done that, he would stare into mine as if under a spell. I am certain that first meeting was when he fell in love with me.”

“W-Wait!? I don't think there's a need to say those things, right!?”

“After that, before he reached the age of ten, Rion had slept with so many maids. He was just a child, yet he used his body like an adult would.”

Ariel had casually narrated yet another, in Rion's opinion, unnecessary story from their past. For him, that was not something his wife should go around telling other people.

"Ari, really, what are you saying?"

"I am retelling embarrassing stories from Rion's life, of course."

"...Why?"

"As a punishment, why else? Rion only had time for Nightmare lately, am I to understand you cannot relax at my side anymore?"

"Not at all."

"Then from here onwards to the capital, I wish for Rion to talk and look at me only."

"Ari... Alrig- ouch, that hurt!"

Rion was about to hug his lovable wife, but when he reached out with his hands in her direction, he felt a hindrance. Something sharp was painfully poking him in the back. When he turned, he saw Nightmare jabbing him with its horn.

"Hey, Rion."

"Eh?"

"Is Nightmare actually a female, perhaps?"

"I wonder?"

"Somehow I am certain that is the case... So tell me, husband..."

"Yes?"

"Should I feel jealousy towards this demonic beast? Is she, perhaps, jealous too?"

"...No way."

In the end, Nightmare never separated from his side. Whether it was female

infatuation, strong friendship, or some other feeling, nobody knew.

And this story was why in the future, among many other titles, Rion would earn the sobriquet [Knight of the Demonic Beast]. It was all because Nightmare would be with Rion in all of his battles.

# Chapter 58

## Birth of a Hero

Sol Aristes was unusually nervous. The reason was clear, he was facing not only the most important Royal Guard official, the Knight Commander, but also the object of every guardsman's loyalty, the King himself.

He knew he was here because a report from the defense of Nyegert was requested and he was the senior Guard officer present at the time. He did not, however, understand why did this meeting have to take place in private with no witnesses, or why would His Majesty wish to be present.

"I have read your reports. They were very meticulous."

Having noticed the nervousness of his subordinate, the Knight Commander started the conversation with an innocuous remark.

"Thank you very much, sir."

"There was a passage towards the end that especially caught my attention..."

"Towards the end, sir?"

"To quote – "This is a strategy only a genius could successfully employ and in no way a reasonable option for an average person.""

"...That was my evaluation at the time, sir, I still believe it to be truth."

"Hmm... The analysis prior to that was very detailed. Don't you think it would make a fine strategy treatise if you put a bit more effort into it?"

Sol's report wasn't limited to the battle alone. It also described all the events leading to it, including Rion's attempts at coordinating detached group movements over a large area with the details of the messenger network this required.

"I am honored by your words of praise, sir, but that possibility is exactly why I deemed

that passage necessary.”

Sol’s way of acknowledging the Commander’s words reinforced the illusion that Rion’s strategy was not something easily replicated by an average commander.

“Hmm... How about you, can you do this?”

The old man didn’t mind his subordinate’s confident manner. He knew Sol had the ability to back his attitude – a reason why he didn’t want the Knight’s talents to be buried in obscurity.

“I... Want to say that I can, sir. Realistically, though, I can only do so under certain conditions.”

“Oh? Conditions?”

“I do not believe the Royal Guard is capable of the feat as is.”

“...What would be necessary?”

The Knight Commander had pride in his organization which was lauded as the strongest military force of the kingdom. Hearing Sol say something like that was a rather unpleasant feeling.

“A dedicated messenger troop. Though honestly, the Intelligence Division would probably have to be involved in the end.”

“A simple messenger squad is not enough and the Intelligence Division would be required? Are you implying that whatever Rion used was of that caliber? “

“Yes, sir. Frankly, I have no idea who or what those people were. But they were able to operate day and night, without a question or complaint. That is beyond what a simple soldier or knight can do and when I consider the burden, only the Intelligence Division operatives seem up to the task.”

“Really...”

Frederick’s gaze met the eyes of the King. There were complex emotions in that look, an odd mixture of mirth and unease. Truthfully, he did feel both of those. He was restless at the thought that Rion, despite his low position and lack of influence,

managed to have this type of an organization at his disposal. At the same time, this kind of thing was so very much like Rion that he found it amusing.

“Second prerequisite is an absolute authority over the soldiers in question. This would be hard to achieve given my rank and even if I was granted one I expect to be faced with resistance and opposition from the rank and file. Having the soldiers second-guess my orders would make the strategy impossible for me to execute.”

“...Does Rion not face this problem?”

“I do not know whether “authority” is a correct term to describe the influence he holds over his soldiers. I believe there is something more to how they treat him than simple fear of disobeying their feudal lord. “

“Something more... Hmm...”

The Knight Commander knew full well that there was a quality to Rion that made others follow him. However, he had never thought that this would immediately become apparent to other people. The air of supremacy was something that tended to grow with years and rank. Rion might have been a landed noble but he was still young. It would be normal for his subordinates to not treat him seriously but, according to Sol’s words, that was not the case.

“The third requirement would be the need to fully memorize the local maps and topography. This is a must to move the various detachments appropriately, have a complete grasp over the changes of the situation, and know who should be given what orders to correct any mishaps along the way...”

“...That’s something you can do, right?”

“Yes, sir. However, I know how only because I witnessed it being done. I am not convinced I would be able to figure it out on my own.”

“And yet Rion did. Does this mean you acknowledge his superiority?”

“As vexing as it is... Yes, I do, sir. That strategy was but one of the schemes he had ready. According to his words, if that wouldn’t work out he would simply try something else.”

“I see...”

Frederick was perfectly aware that military geniuses did exist. They were talents impossible to match, regardless of experience or effort.

And if Rion, hypothetically, was one of their kind... Old, familiar worries resurfaced in the hearts of the King and his Knight Commander.

“What is your overall impression of that man, Rion Frey?”

“As I have explained before, sir, I consider him highly talented.”

“And you are perfectly aware that is not what I want to hear about.”

“Sir...”

That was the bull’s eye. Sol knew Rion’s plans and was perfectly aware how inappropriate they were. However, he also knew what was driving the boy to try making them a reality and that made him not want to discuss the subject. Even if he was to be asked by the King.

“I want to hear your frank opinion. If young Frey is up to something suspicious, I will not pry for details. I am well acquainted with the murky aspects of his persona.”

“Sir...”

Even that reassurance from the Knight Commander’s lips was not enough to overcome Sol’s misgivings.

“How about if we give our word as well?”

“Majesty...”

“No matter what you say here, we shall not punish Rion Frey based on your words. Neither now, nor in the future. We swear on this crown.”

“...Yes, majesty.”

Naturally, Sol could not remain silent after that. It would be tantamount to renouncing his identity as a member of the Royal Guard.

“Sire... I lack the words to describe him aptly. Any such description I attempt ends up

being self-contradicting and ill-fitting.”

“Worry not and say what is on your mind.”

“Yes, majesty. Rion Frey fundamentally distrusts people and that lack of faith in other humans is a barrier separating him from others. I have been told this is due to circumstances of his childhood.”

“The slums?”

“I am unaware of the specifics, all I know is that it was a very harsh life. Nevertheless, despite all that, he had apparently been seeking someone he could really trust. And he found-”

“Vincent Woodville.”

“Yes, majesty. Vincent had been one of the very limited number of people in whose company Rion lets down his guard. Whenever that happens, he’s like a completely different person – amiable and light-hearted. It makes you doubt that strange youth really is Rion. And it is also something that trusted circle of people really adores in him.”

“Eh? When did you witness such a thing?”

Sol was speaking as if he had seen that personally. That made the Knight Commander curious.

“During our return to the capital. Was sir not aware?”

“...What happened?”

The knight commander was entirely clueless as to what Sol had been talking about. And looking at the King made it obvious he didn’t know anything either.

“The whole army, main force included, took part in a triumphal parade upon our return to the capital-”

“That I know, I heard the crowds were unusually lively.”

“They were, sir. Frankly, even I was slightly moved.”

“Moved. You?”

Sol’s admission made the Knight Commander feel like the report he had heard had been based on a completely different event.

“I worry I may be presumptuous by saying this but, ultimately, I do believe a variant of this sentiment will reach your ears soon, sir. I felt like I was witnessing the birth of a hero.”

“...Due to the presence of the Crown Prince and that Maria lass, perhaps.”

“Huh? Why would the crown prince’s... Ah, my humblest apologies.”

Sol realized he was about to say that the Crown Prince was not fit to be called the hero and he retracted in a hurry.

“Let’s pretend you never said that. Start from the beginning if you can, what exactly happened on that day?”

“...Yes, sir.”

Sol was requested to tell the story, so he would do so, even though he didn’t really understand what his superior was so concerned about. He started to narrate the events of that day.

The orders regarding the triumphal parade reached them a day before they were due to enter the capital. Sol could recall seeing Rion smile bitterly once the baron learned the messenger was dispatched from the main force’s headquarters, not the royal palace. That piece of news caused Frederick to have the same reaction, he could pretty much guess what happened behind the scenes.

The parade was to be a joint effort, Rion was ordered to wait for the main force. Even though the whole thing left him nonplussed, he initially focused on figuring out what to spend the time on. Sol didn’t give the problem nearly as much thought and didn’t know what had Rion ended up doing exactly. He didn’t keep track of what the young Baron occupied himself with and simply used the opportunity productively to train the squires.

It was indisputable that the Bandeaux territorial army was considerably more skilled in the art of war, not only in regard to horsemanship and unit movement but also many

other aspects of the matter, and there was much to learn from them.

In the end, it took nearly a week for the main force to catch up. Still, Sol managed to use every single moment of that time, so he wasn't inclined to complain. And neither apparently was Rion.

And then, the problems started. The troops of the main force arrived extremely well prepared for the parade, so well, in fact, that it was doubtful whether they had actually been doing anything else that week. Every single horse was decorated with ceremonial garments and every single piece of armor was polished so well that it had nearly shone with inner light.

The headquarters requested that the Bandeaux clansmen be "lent" to them for the parade so that other knights can better match the colors of the clans. Those colors had been deemed fitting for the Crown Prince and the Marquess House's representatives. That was not odd – red, yellow, blue and green symbolized four primal elements. It was exactly why the clans had picked them in the first place.

Sol expected Rion to complain about this, but the youth showed no dissent and accepted the request without seeming to mind. As a result, the detached force, upon its return to capital, would consist of Royal Guard squires only and all its thunder would likely be stolen by the main army.

But the actual events of the triumphal parade unfolded in a completely unexpected manner.

Arnold, Erwin, Charlotte, and Lancelot with Maria each entered the city at the head of a force in brightly colored armor. Row upon a row of knights in shining steel lined up behind them to a great delight of the capital's citizens that massed along the main thoroughfare. The crowds were unexpectedly lively and loudly cheered the returning army.

But when the detached force finally got its turn, the atmosphere changed completely. The sight of the leading figures caused the crowds to fall silent.

They were riding a beast of most unusual appearance – jet black with a horn protruding out of its forehead, a creature that had clearly not been a horse. The girl was wearing a snow-white dress, completely out of place in a military environment, and rode on the beast sidesaddle. The youth sat astride behind her, embracing and

supporting her with his arms, and he was dressed in a military-style black outfit. On his back there was a black mantle lined in red that fluttered on the wind, the flickering color making it look as if it shined.

The couple was followed by a group of valkyrie-like girls clad in white light armor and armed with spears riding next to a group of youths dressed in black, with masks on their faces. It was Ariel and Rion entering the capital followed by her bodyguards from Clan White and his shadows from Clan Black.

The scene looked like something straight from a fairy tale. All the onlookers were drawn into the ambiance and rendered speechless.

No one cheered. And yet every single pair of eyes was glued to the entourage. Then Rion and Ariel passed by. And every single onlooker followed them as if possessed. Not saying a word.

The spell was eventually broken by unexpected cheers from the roadside.

Yells of [Boss] and [Senior Sister] could be heard and Sol, at first, had no idea who they were aimed at.

However, the serious aura around Rion disappeared as soon as he had heard them. After restlessly looking around for a while, he spotted the cheering group, skillfully rose to stand on the back of Nightmare and waved with his right hand smiling from ear to ear.

At that moment, Sol felt the air vibrate.

The speechless citizens, as if released from a curse, shouted all at once any and all meaning in their yell lost in the din. After a short while, the roar of the crowd transformed into chanting Rion's name and rounds of "hurrah". Rion and his entourage were surrounded by pure enthusiasm.

This was stirred up by those strangers Sol spotted initially. He had never seen them before, so he couldn't recognize them as the dweller of the slums. The group rushed towards Rion and Ariel praising their achievements and thanking them for their efforts. Once they got closer, Rion jumped from Nightmare's back towards their circle. That raised an even larger cheer from the crowds.

Rion and the slum dwellers started to chat cheerfully right there and then without any

care for the world, soon to be joined by Ariel.

However, after a while of this, complaints begun to be voiced from other citizens unhappy at losing the couple from their line of sight. Those were answered with heckles from the poor folk of the slum.

Realizing that things could turn ugly soon, Rion once again stood on the back of his beast and raised a fist into the air. That made the crowds happy once more.

Nobody cared about the army that passed by moments before. Rion stole the show and became the triumph's main attraction.

Regular citizens might not have known the exact details of the battle, but they had their ways of finding out who had played the leading role.

"Mhm..."

Once he heard the story in full, the Knight Commander voiced his understanding of two facts. He now knew that this was purposefully hidden from him and the King due to envy provoked by Rion's achievements. All that business with triumphal parade reeked of an underhanded attempt at usurping the boy's merit and recognition. And while such a thing was within expectations, it happened way too fast.

He could now also imagine why Sol had called that event a birth of a hero. He was well aware such a thing was not always good for the government in change. While it usually led to favorable future outcomes, the advent of a hero tended to cause turbulences and damage to existing status quo and was most unwelcome to those rooted in the present with a stake in existing order of things.

"Sir, why did you want him to take part in the war?"

Sol saw through the inner turmoil of his superior. He did not see a reason that would justify giving Rion an opportunity like this if he was an object of so much apprehension, so he decided to ask out of curiosity.

"Having him take part was never the goal on its own, it was just a mean to lessen the resentment."

Even without speaking the name, it was obvious who was this about.

“Ah, so that was the reason. In that case, your plan was moderately successful, sir. Very moderately. They are on speaking terms now, but nothing more.”

“No more... Significant progress?”

“Even now he acts only for the sake of his dead Lord. The hunt for glory, the merits... Everything. He wants to become famous, to make everyone aware that Rion Frey’s only Lord was that Vincent Woodville.”

“...So that is what he intends.”

“On the other hand his wife had told me that it’s not as if he wants to fight. It’s just that others keep pushing the responsibility on him.”

“Is that so.....”

Fully aware that the one pushing that responsibility to Rion was, in fact, himself, the Knight Commander felt his heart ache.

“If you truly fear him, sir, wouldn’t it be better just to leave him alone? Certainly, he may never relinquish his grudge. But him being dragged into the middle of things against his wishes will not help that process either. And it may end up piling even more resentment on top of the old hurts.”

Sol too had taken notice of other people’s envy towards Rion. He also agreed that it was only natural for those kinds of things to happen. It didn’t help that Rion had no desire to be liked or seen in better light and would always take action without fear or consideration of its impact on his peers.

“...I shall keep that in mind.”

“Do you still plan to make him fight, sir?”

“No decision has been made yet. However, in my opinion, heroes are not made, they are born. If an era needs a hero, one will rise to the occasion no matter what.”

“...That rings true, sir.”

“That’s all for now. You may leave.”

“Sir.”

Sol left the room after expressing gratitude towards the King and the Knight Commander. The two men, now alone in the room, looked at each other with bitterness on their faces. Somehow, they always ended like this when Rion was the topic.

“A hero, eh...”

“We cannot be sure. There are countless people with multitude of war feats.”

“Don’t play the fool, Frederick. You may say that but even you think that Rion has the capability to become a hero, do you not?”

“...If he assumes command under the Crown Prince, yes...”

The Knight Commander could not disagree.

“A wise ruler employing a hero, eh? Wouldn’t that be wonderful. All we know right now, though, is that we need more time.”

It would be problematic if a hero arose in this generation without giving Arnold the time to grow. The ability of the present King to use him was irrelevant, in generations past, heroes had always been an eyesore for the ruling monarch. Thus, the relationship between Rion and the Crown Prince could not be allowed to remain as it was.

“I guess we need to pull him out of the fighting.”

“Were you not the one who said that attempting such a thing was futile?”

“Even so, sire, we must do what we can.”

“True... I guess I shall end up giving him the rank of Viscount and recognition in coin.”

The two men not only wanted to remove Rion from the war, they wanted to do it in a way that did not increase his strength. There was little difference between Viscounts and Barons, and monetary rewards were a temporary boon. Compared to enlarging one’s fief, such awards were insignificant.

“What do you expect his enemies to do now? While it would be great if we managed

to suppress his growth for a time, having him be crushed as a result would be rather unwelcome.”

“...We can let him achieve more once the fuss dies a down a bit. I do not think they would go as far as to aim for his life, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I wonder. I do not have them investigated that well.”

“...What if we are wrong, Frederick?”

“I do not know. A hero betrayed out of envy is not an uncommon theme in the history books.”

“Frederick!?”

“A jest, sire. While I do not doubt Sol’s words, I have witnessed a number of heroic existences in my life. Speaking frankly, I struggle to imagine Rion in the role.”

“If you say so. Nevertheless, we need to be vigilant. I guess I shall leave the details to you. You have a plan already, do you not?”

“By your will.”

Rion found it very annoying to be dragged in and out like this. And because neither of the men understood him very well, they ended up shaken by him so much all the time.

All they wished for was a peace of mind that would be gained by having Rion pledge his allegiance to the Crown. They could not imagine how impossible a dream that was.

Someone who lived their whole life as a royal or a member of the Guard could never comprehend a child of the slum.

# Chapter 59

## Heart to Heart

Rion Frey became a viscount. However rank was the only thing that changed in his life. His domain was still limited to Bandeaux and its borders remained unchanged. He might have been given a sizeable sum of money, but it was not sizeable enough to fund a new initiative within his land. On the whole, the reward he was given paled when compared to his war effort.

Not that Rion cared about this at all. His objective had been to raise his fame, within the capital at the very least, and that had been achieved. There was still the small matter of spreading the rumors and tying all this to Vincent, but that was for the members of Resist to accomplish.

He was actually more occupied with the question of when he would be allowed to return to his fief. The memorandum permitting his return was yet to arrive and he was stuck wasting time waiting for it.

“Hey, are you listening?”

For Rion, this might have been wasted, but it wasn't so for other people. People like Charlotte.

“...Yes? What is it?”

“You really should pay more attention to your surroundings. The rumors regarding you are quite bad right now.”

“I'm sure Miss Charlotte is correct and I can guess where those rumors originated.”

“If you know this much, you should do something about it.”

“Why would I?”

“Why? It is all done to prevent you from achieving any more feats of arms, you know?”

“Miss Charlotte is very well informed, as expected of someone belonging to the three Houses.”

“I...”

Charlotte wavered hearing that. Rion guessed that his observation likely wasn't the only reason for that.

“I see. So your family is scheming too.”

“...They are. They do not listen to a word I say.”

“And it's not the first time, right?”

“You mean...”

Rion brought up the time when he had contacted Charlotte seeking help for clearing the false charges from Ariel and Vincent. For both of them, those memories were bitter.

“Thankfully, this time everything is going according to plan. So all is good.”

“Eh?”

“I didn't try to monopolize the merit for fame alone. I knew that once I tried to do that, other people would get worried enough to try removing me from the subjugation campaign. Which would let me go back to my domain and focus on governing.”

“So you did it on purpose?”

“I did.”

“And here I was worrying for you terribly.”

“Huh?”

“Would it be so bad to tell me this beforehand?”

“...Tell Miss Charlotte?”

“Exactly. Tell me.”

“...Erm.”

Rion and Charlotte’s relationship was one in which both parties felt free to speak candidly with each other. Rion saw nothing unusual in this, but for people that knew his personality better, that kind of relationship was pretty special already. Due to this, it wasn’t exactly proper, but, at the same time, it wasn’t exactly improper. On balance, all things considered, they were forced to acknowledge that it probably was within the bounds of decorum.

“Hey, you, aren’t you getting overly familiar? You certainly have guts to say things like that in front of Lady Ariel.”

While Rion was at loss for words, Venus spoke up.

“Venus, not a word more. You’re now under a house arrest.”

“But wasn’t she rude?”

“...Not nearly as much as a commoner that addresses a Lady of a Marquess lineage with the words you used, don’t you think?”

He didn’t bother pointing out that the way she spoke to him, her liege, was as bad. It was way too late for that.

“My loyalty is for Lady Ariel alone, I don’t care for other people.”

“...Your house arrest period will be extended to a month.”

“Eh!?”

“You quite obviously haven’t reflected on your actions. Especially leaving the territory out of your own volition and commissioning those sets of armor.”

The guard-maids from Clan White had left the territory on their own once they had learned that the battle was over. That had been why they had been present to take part in the triumph.

And they commissioned the creation of those matching sets of armors out of

frustration born from being told they would be useless on the battlefield.

“Didn’t it prove helpful in the end?”

“It did. But if I start excusing bad behavior just because the outcome somehow turned out to be alright, it would be unfair on those that are dutiful and work with dedication.”

“...Hmph, it’s for Lady Ariel’s sake.”

“And that kind of attitude is unacceptable. Listen to what I’m saying for once. Those who serve must be mindful of their liege’s reputation at all times. Furthermore, they have to be mindful of their own too. After all, if the servant has a bad attitude, it’s natural to expect the master to be as bad, if not worse. “

“...To think that those kinds of words would come from Lord Rion.”

Venus only knew Rion as someone who paid no attention to what others thought of him, someone who was constantly being told to stop doing that.

“Well, I’m not a valet anymore.”

Rion was perfectly aware that this was how he had treated the world around him.

“I can’t imagine you as one. How was that even possible? “

“No point trying to change the subject. A month of house arrest to commence once we return to Bandeaux.”

“How harsh. Even though we worked so hard to shape up and finally be of some use in the war.”

Since trying to change the subject by provoking Rion to anger failed, Venus changed tack and tried to evoke sympathy instead.

“People that show noticeable improvement with just a month of effort are amateurs and I have no use for those. Besides, all that you really managed to sharpen up is your appearance...”

And that too failed miserably.

“But a month is too long.”

“You reap what you sow. Furthermore.....”

Rion stopped talking mid-word and cocked his head.

“Lord. Visitor.”

An unexpected voice could be heard from the direction of the roof. Hearing the words, Rion relaxed visibly.

“See? You’re not useful at all.”

“...Why?”

“You didn’t even notice we are surrounded. I was worried we were about to be attacked, but thankfully it’s just an acquaintance.”

“There are that many of them?...”

Rion’s explanation made Venus terribly depressed. She was also vexed by the apparent contrast between her and Chandra, who was properly discharging his duty.

But there was no time for consolation. There was much disturbance near the door and Rion could think of only one person capable of causing such disruption.

And soon after, the Crown Prince entered. He was not on his own, though. Unexpectedly he was accompanied by Sol who, while a Royal Guard, was not assigned to Arnold. This meant that there was a reason for both of them to be here.

“I never expected to meet His Highness in this kind of place.”

Rion rose from his seat and moved to welcome the Prince. There was a hint of malice in his words.

“I do apologize for intruding. There is a matter that brooks no delay, as well as topics that cannot be discussed in the palace.”

Arnold didn’t seem to mind. He answered without touching on Rion’s attitude.

“...Did something serious happen?”

“Serious... No, not really. On the whole, the matter is rather silly.”

“Highness came all this way to discuss something... Silly?”

“I failed to prevent this from happening. This makes the matter partially my responsibility and demands I offer an apology.”

“...Could we start with some explanations, perhaps?”

“Ah, yes. The date for your return to Bandeaux has been set. You will, however, be ordered to leave your retinue behind.”

“.....Huh?”

Rion could not comprehend the intention behind the order, even for harassment, this went too far. Protection of the Kingdom was the task of the army and the knights, retinues were meant to protect domains of the nobles. In the rare case they would be needed at war, their liege-lord would have absolute authority.

In this kind of reality, a country that demands that a noble hands over his retinue could only be called unjust and tyrannical.

“There is an excuse, of course. “Viscount Frey must return to his fief as keeping him away from his domain for this long is bound to have a negative impact on the governance and stability. However, his retinue must remain as it has valuable experience in fighting the devil forces and its departure at this time would be an irreplaceable loss to the Kingdom’s effort.”“

“...Pure sophistry. There’s some truth to the argument, but the order is, nevertheless, fundamentally unjust. And yet it was approved.”

“Correct on all counts.”

“Is it binding? How do they plan to enforce it?”

“It is not and, to be precise, they do not. But any veto on your part shall require certain bureaucratic formalities. I expect them to prove unusually troublesome and abnormal in your case.”

“Will it now...”

He would have to argue with those that were harassing him, after all. In normal circumstances, this would not be something that required any procedures. But this scheme was backed by Charlotte’s family, House Fatillas, and, most likely, House Aqusmea too.

Even backed by reason, tradition, and law, Rion would have his work cut out for him.

“My sincere apologies. I argued for our future war effort to be centered around you, but my proposal was rejected.”

“...Surely, that would not be acceptable.”

Rion was barely holding himself back from asking Arnold if he understood what adding fuel to the fire was all about.

“Furthermore...”

Arnold started to speak again but soon hesitated as if he couldn’t make himself say something.

“There’s more?”

“...The memorandum was already acknowledged.”

“Acknowledged? I don’t recall knowing any of this before now?”

“...Not by you.”

The Crown Prince couldn’t force himself to tell the story to its conclusion, but Rion figured out the rest on his own.

“Ah. I see. The Six Clans of Bandeaux agreed.”

“We would never!”

Venus objected loudly, as a member of Clan White she could not leave Rion’s words unchallenged.

“...Five Clans, then?”

“No.”

Now Chandra refuted his Lord’s statement.

“...Four then. Not entirely surprising, I doubt that the existence of Clans White and Black is widely known.”

“I doubt that happened intentionally, your retainers were likely tricked with sly words.”

Arnold tried defending the Clans feeling that aura around Rion turned dangerous.

“...Whatever the case, I do not mind. They have their own goals, they are free to do whatever they feel necessary to achieve them.”

“Rion...”

In Arnold’s eyes, Rion was just pretending to be tough.

“When will the memorandum arrive?”

“It should be served tomorrow, which is why I sought to meet you in such haste.”

“Then I guess tomorrow is when I’ll go. Finally able to return to my fief...”

“I must ask you to wait.”

“Hmm?”

This was when Sol joined the discussion. He did, after all, have a reason to be here.

“I was ordered to take my unit with you to the Bandeaux. The order was so sudden that we are not yet prepared for departure.”

“...Your unit? Whatever for?”

“Two reasons – to supplement the defenses of Bandeaux while your retinue is away and to learn from Viscount Frey.”

“...Oh? And how much will I be compensated for this?”

“What?”

“Are you expecting to be tutored for free?”

“...You want... Payment?”

“I don’t really need money, but I do not like to be taken for granted either.”

“I received an order.”

“Orders this, orders that. Do your orders justify everything? It’s not my problem that your superiors didn’t consider other involved parties. It’s really amusing to see them expect everyone to just fall in line.”

Outwardly, Rion pretended to be unaffected, but internally he was seething with rage. And Sol was a very convenient target to vent some of it.

“...That’s...”

“Orders. Hmph. Fine, I’ll play along. You may leave if you have no more business with me.”

“...”

“Oh, right, since His Highness is here, I should be the one to go. Do excuse the lapse of manners. I bid you good day, sirs.”

This particular lodging house was one of those belonging to Rion, still, he rose and left just like he had said he would. No one followed him. No one but Ariel.

But even she was at the limits of her patience and had something to say before she went.

“I have told sir Sol before that Rion trusts no one, yet yarns for somebody to believe, haven’t I?”

Her anger was also focused on Sol.

“...You have, milady.”

“The reason for my husband’s lack of trust is a crippling fear of betrayal. But even though Rion is like that, he still tries to gather the courage to reach out. So, why? Why is this world so cold to him?”

“That’s not something I can...”

“Sir understands nothing and thus has no right to serve under my husband. What sir sees is just the surface, that is no different from any other person.”

After saying this, Ariel followed Rion out of the building.

“...”

To be fair, Ariel’s words weren’t targeted at Sol specifically and anyone that knew all the circumstances would be able to see that. But the knight did not have that kind of knowledge and struggled to find sense in her words.

Her words did wound him though and completely deflated his mood.

““The world is cold towards Rion.”...I never thought about it that way.”

Charlotte mused on this unexpected fact. By this point, Rion had managed to grow to superhuman stature in her eyes. She saw him as someone that could do anything and he was indeed talented enough to give people that impression. But if one really thought about what he had achieved so far, the only desire he managed to fulfill was Ariel.

And even that came with a price steep enough that Charlotte couldn’t say with certainty that the two of them were happy.

“Truthfully, Ariel is no different. She gave everything to be a perfect fiancée for the Crown Prince, only to be repaid with loathing and a betrayal of the worst kind.”

Arnold picked up the thread of Charlotte’s thought. But those words were less about Ariel and more about his regret and that made Charlotte flustered.

“Your Highness... Do you still love her?”

“That is no longer the case. Not entirely, at least. I still have some feelings for her, but I shall not let them coax me into something unbecoming again.”

“If so, why mention her circumstances?”

“...I just wonder. How can they understand each other so well. How could they do it when Vincent was still with them. What bonded those three so strongly... I just wonder, what do they have that we miss?”

Arnold, as he was in the present, had no trusted companions. It became obvious to him that all those strong relationships he thought he had built were but illusions. And that made him admire the relationship between those three even more,

“...That, Highness, is something I would like to know too. “

Charlotte’s thoughts were somewhat different to Arnold’s. She’s wondering what she should do to make Rion accept her more, even if just a little, and how could she ever understand him just like Ariel.

“Charlotte.”

“Highness?”

“Rion is an impossible goal, you know. Trying to tear those two apart will end up turning you into another sorry me.”

“...I plan nothing of the sort, highness. After all, I have tried such a thing before.”

“You have what?”

“I have tried to disrupt the relationship between Your Highness and Miss Ariel. Maria’s chastisements were instigated by me in a way that would put blame on your former fiance.”

“...That... In other words...”

This sudden confession shook Arnold to the core. Until now, he had viewed Charlotte as the only upright member of their group and now he knew how wrong he had been.

“I was part of that tragedy. I also have Vincent’s blood on my hands.”

“So that was the case.....”

“I this is why I wish to save them from further betrayal. I want to be their ally, even if they will not have me. That is my way of atonement, Highness.”

“I hear you. “



While Charlotte and Arnold renewed their resolve, Rion and Ariel headed towards the slums. That place, one he faced death in multiple times, was the only refuge where he could find peace.

Once he was noticed by the locals, some of them tried to approach but were warned away by Ariel. Rion's bad mood was rather noticeable and it was clearly one of those times when it was better to let the demons sleep. So they sent her off with a smile and commiserated through hand signals.

Rion couldn't fail to notice that, of course.

“Was my mood actually that bad?”

The question was a clear indication that he had actually calmed down.

“Yes, it was. Really, really sour in fact. Anywhere particular you were heading to?”

“...Nowhere really. “

“Shall we go to a brothel in that case? We could be alone in there for a bit.”

“I... Isn't it too bright for that?”

With this, there was no more anger in Rion's heart. He couldn't really keep raging while alone with her.

“So daytime with me is not good? “

Ariel started to needle Rion.

“...Not at all. We are discussing a brothel, though.”

“Hmm, I guess Rion is right. I would not want my groans to be heard by people I know.”

“...Really, Ari, you should stop saying things like that.”

As usual, Rion would start to complain as soon as Ariel turned even slightly indecent. After all, he didn't have much more to complain about.

“Why would I??”

“Because Ariel is a woman I yearn for.”

“I am your wife, silly.”

“Even if you're my wife, I still want you to remain as the woman I yearn for.”

“A woman Rion yearns for... What kind of woman is that?”

“One just like Ariel.”

“...Idiot.”

Grabbing a hold of Rion's cheeks with both of her hands, Ariel brought her face closer to his. Without a shred of care about the fact they were being watched. And then, as their lips intertwined, she embraced his head.

She was doing this on purpose. She knew perfectly well that people would make fun of Rion as a result and she wanted him to remember this warmth of slum dwellers.

For all the good and all the bad, slums were the place Rion had originated from. Nobody was conscious of this more than her.

# Chapter 60

## Return To Bandeaux

The journey back to Bandeaux was considerably harsher than the amateurish attempt at marching practice. Rion was forcing a very fast pace on everybody since the Royal Guard presence meant he couldn't stop at the settlements along the way to check on the situation of the Resist members there like he would usually do.

Not being able to do his work for the organization, he decided to return to Camargue as quickly as humanly possible to resume the government duties instead. The result was a forced march that was harsh on the Royal Guard squires and even harder on Clan White's warrior-maids. It was natural for those girls to suffer more, not only was their constitution weaker but they had much less training in their life.

And unfortunately for them, Rion treated this journey as a way to make up for the latter deficiency and applied himself earnestly to the task. Most of the time, he pushed them on with a barrage of harsh words, but whenever it looked like they were about to break he offered warm words of reassurance and comfort. He balanced the two so well that even Venus couldn't complain about their treatment. Eventually, all the girls, miss Weiss excepted, started to get attached to Rion as a result.

Ariel wasn't blind to that, of course. Whenever she spotted a girl whose level of affection for Rion rose visibly, she cracked down hard mercilessly hammering down all the nails that stood out with harsh warnings and strict treatment. She was now certain that, at the very least, she would have to be on her guard once they returned to Bandeaux.

After all, Rion had vices that even she could do nothing about. He might have had no interest in women that weren't her, but he still had that outrageous tendency to entertain any girl determined to get close regardless.

He was an easy target for them due to his lack of recognition of the merit in different approaches to handling women, something that Ariel found mortifying. Being of noble birth, her private feelings aside, Ariel, as a wife, was fairly tolerant of the idea of her husband's relationships with other women. The problem was Rion's complete lack of self-awareness in situations like this one, regardless of how angry she got with him.

He saw no connection between how he treated other women and how he treated her, a stance that brought her an equal amount of worry and joy.

And, this small digression aside, this was how Rion's group happened to return to Bandeaux at an astonishing pace.

"...That's, kind of, amazing."

Rion said this to nobody in particular upon seeing how busy Camargue had become.

"Is this fief not yours?"

"Eh? It is. Obviously."

"How can you be surprised by this if that is so?"

"Maybe because I've been away for waaay toooo looong and the place is much livelier than it was when I left it."

Rion had put a strong emphasis on "way too long". Sol shrugged it off since that had nothing to do with him. And besides, from the Royal Guardsman's point of view, Rion, like all nobles, belonged to the Kingdom.

"...I guess this place does not need its Lord."

He was not the type to stay mum after being told off either.

"Say what?"

"Does it not look like so?"

"...That's tantamount to saying that the country itself does not need its king."

"I do not recall phrasing it like that?"

"Still, it's one and the same in the end. It's rather surprising to discover that the Royal Guard entertains such extreme ideas."

"...This conversation is over"

“As you wish.”

The two of them squabbled in this manner for an uncountable number of times now. It would take a lot more for their relationship to improve.

The squabble with Sol over, for now, Rion returned his attention to his domain again.

The main road was so busy that a person remembering Camargue from before couldn't be faulted for doubting they have arrived at the correct destination. There were also many shops Rion saw for the first time. Although the way Sol phrased it was incredibly irritating, Rion was actually very happy that the restoration of Bandeaux kept proceeding apace even without him.

“...You seem happy.”

Sol mused without enthusiasm. This was a conscious action. He figured that since nobody else was trying to start a conversation with Rion, he should be the one to do so.

“Won't disagree. When I saw this town for the first time, it was nothing like this.”

“So you are not only a good commander, but a good ruler too.”

“Am I? As you said yourself – cities can grow even without a Lord. All it takes is dedication and effort from the citizens.”

“...I see.”

Sol had figured out some time ago that as long as he prodded Rion into a conversation, without fear of the inevitable barbs that would come his way, he would, eventually, get this kind of response. An unfiltered response, one coming from Rion talking without concern for social standing – Rion that dazzled more than usual.

“Oh? They came to greet us.”

Rion's gaze rested on a group of people not far off in front of them. They were not the residents of the castle – it was Folz and the employees of his establishment. Sol did not know them but could guess from Rion's reaction that they were of the rare kind Rion was not wary of.

“Welcome back, boss.”

“I am back indeed. Sorry for pulling you off work, you seem busy.”

“Not at all. We had just finished accommodating a guest that booked lodgings, we have a free moment.”

“Is that so. Seems that the things here turned out great, somehow.”

“Apparently there’s a rumor making rounds that this is the safest place in the Kingdom right now. It seems it just developed on its own.”

This meant that this particular rumor was not instigated by Resist. It was true, though, that Bandeaux not only had the safest road to the capital but also was the safest place to trade with neighboring countries.

“...Really. I see that the number of shops had increased too.”

“Didn’t you order that, boss?”

“I guess I did.”

It was true that Rion had ordered new businesses to be proactively ordered and supported but he had never expected his policy to be this successful. To be fair, it had not been the only, or even the main, contributing factor behind the growth of commerce. It happened mostly because Camargue was perceived as the safest location for people to gather.

“A town where you can get unusual things safely. This is how Camargue is now seen.”

“Unusual things?”

“Exotic food, live animals, farming implements... Many things are being sold here. So many, in fact, it’s impossible to list them all. Best if boss goes to look around by himself.”

“Alright. I’ll do just that, then. Anyhow, I have so many things that I want to talk about but I don’t want to hinder your work. I’ll come visit again later.”

Hearing these words everybody in the group started to complain at once. They had

not seen him for a long time now and all of them had much they wished to talk about.

In the end, Rion, somehow, managed to pacify them and depart. He too had duties to return to as soon as possible. While he did have some information about the state of things during his absence, there surely were many things he had no knowledge of.

“...Can I ask you a strange question?”

Again, Sol initiated a conversation with Rion.

“Yes?”

“About those women from earlier. Are they.....”

“...You mean their jobs?”

“I do. Not that I have anything against their occupation, by no means. I just noticed you seemed to be close to similar women back in the capital as well.”

What Sol was referring to was the scene during the triumphal parade. Rion had been welcomed by denizens of the slums and their number naturally included prostitutes. Sol couldn't fail to notice their enthusiasm as they had surrounded Rion back then.

“Well... I'm acquainted with many people.”

“I guess you are indeed.”

“But if you have to know, I never entertained any of them. There is no connection between us.”

Rion started to make excuses so that Sol wouldn't get a wrong idea, but he said too much. The knight was a bright guy, he would obviously start to wonder what kind of relationship could there be if it was not the typical patronage.

“...What makes them love you so much if that is so?”

And obviously, Sol was the type to ask that kind of question straight on. This was just one of many things he wished to learn of Rion.

“Well... It's that, I guess.”

He couldn't possibly tell Sol that he was actually the boss of the brothel's head. That alone wouldn't be a problem, but if Sol managed to connect the dots to the wider Underground, things would turn complicated.

"That?"

"...Prostitutes fostered me. Makes sense, right?"

This was a lie thought out on the spot. However, it was based on a grain of truth. Rion knew for a fact that his actual foster parent was a woman and there weren't many job opportunities for a female in the slum.

"...You were raised by a prostitute?"

This was outside Sol's expectations. He asked the question with eyes wide from surprise.

"Do you consider that a bad thing?"

"Ah no, not really."

"Spare me hollow denials. I remember people looking at me with eyes like yours ever since I became aware of my surroundings. It's not hard for me to spot contempt in others."

Rion said this while indicating at his eyes. The opprobrium associated with being raised by a prostitute was nothing compared to what faced those with heterochromia.

"...Is that so."

It wasn't really Sol's fault those kinds of understandings kept happening. He couldn't really imagine what kind of things Rion had gone through in his childhood, but he was slowly beginning to comprehend how the boy's complicated character came to be.

They were welcomed once again before they managed to reach castle gates, this time by the castle staff. To Rion, this was surprising, there shouldn't have been any retainer left in there that would go out of their way to welcome him.

And those weren't the retainers, but the guests – Jan and the others.

“Oh? So this is what it takes to get me this kind of treatment? I have to go away for a while?”

“There’s no time for bad humor, Rion.”

Rion’s attempt at a joke fell flat in front of Sept.

“No time? Why the rush?”

Clan Black should have informed him of any emergencies, yet no such report reached him.

“We had been visited by an envoy.”

“Envoy? To make it here before us... That’s really quick.”

Rion’s first reaction was to expect that the envoy was from the capital.

“Think again. The messenger came from Orcus.”

“...From where?”

Sept’s reply came so far out of the left field that it took a good while for Rion to process it.

“Our neighbor, Kingdom of Orcus, sent us an envoy...”

“Why on earth...?”

“To announce the visit of friendship from their prince.”

“...That... Makes no sense whatsoever. Shouldn’t that kind of diplomacy be conducted in the capital?”

“I don’t know their reasons. And whatever they are, it’s on us anyway since he’s coming to Camargue.”

“Ah, hold on. Where is that envoy right now?”

“He hurried back to Orcus to inform them of your return.”

“Without attempting to confirm that I agree to this?”

“...I guess so.”

“The heck!?”

Sept had blundered by allowing this to happen, but then he had never studied to be a diplomat. He chanced into the role by having nothing better to do when Bandeaux needed someone to send to neighboring kingdoms to discuss the demon invasion.

Trying to blame him here would be overly harsh, so Rion didn't even try.

“Sorry. But to be honest, we had no clue how to proceed. After all, it's an official visit from a foreign country, by a royal at that.”

“...Which is why you're all here waiting for me like this. I thought there must have been a reason.”

“And you were right. The envoy has been awaiting your return for a long time now. Hearing that you have come back must have lit fire under his feet, bound to happen I guess.”

“We have to hasten the preparations in that case. Let's have... Ariel take charge of things. She's the most knowledgeable in this area.”

“...So be it, I shall try.”

Ariel did have some knowledge regarding social occasions, but it did not extend to the nuances of diplomacy. Hence, she was not fully confident. Nevertheless, she knew very well she would do a better job than if they had to rely on commoners, so she accepted the charge.

“And you mister royal guard. You help too.”

“Huh?”

“Escorting prestigious guests is a part of a royal guard duty, no? You should know what to do.”

“You may be technically correct, but do you not think escorting and preparing a reception are two completely different things?”

“Ah stop complaining already, there’s no one here that knows more than you about the subject.”

“...I am a knight.”

“Don’t care. I won’t accept no for an answer.”

“...I will accept no blame if this fails.”

“That’s fine. Then the two of you... Wait, two of you? Don’t even think about any funny business with Ariel. You got that?”

“Like I would do such a thing”

“Haa? What’s with that tone? Are you trying to say Ariel has no charms?”

“And just how do you expect me to answer that?”

Sol knew that trying to deny would just lead straight back to Rion complaining about his potential advances on Ariel and that, in cases like this, the correct choice was to give no answer at all.

“...I guess I’ll let you off. I’d like to know what kind of business brings the prince here, but it’s too late for investigations and we don’t really know how good they are in dealing with foreign spies.”

He didn’t have to add that this matter didn’t warrant putting Clan Black personnel in danger and he didn’t actually have the authority for any kind of serious negotiations. He was sure that the Kingdom of Orcus knew the latter too, so, on the whole, it really might be a visit of friendship.

“I guess we’ll do some sleuthing once they are here. There are many more tools at our disposal on the home ground.”

This concluded the matter for time being. There was much more Rion wanted to learn, but he decided to wait with asking until they got to a conference room. In the end, despite just coming back he spent his day as busily as usual.



The meeting Rion desired couldn't start immediately as there were various distractions to clear first. Distractions like:

"I apologize, Lord"

Mercury bowed down deeply, begging forgiveness as soon as Rion entered the room. The young Frey had absolutely no idea why.

"...Did you do something bad?"

"Eh? Ah, no, Lord. I've caused no problems myself."

"Why apologize then?"

"Because of my father's... Betrayal."

The fact that Kiel and the other clan heads chose to separate from Rion and continue taking part in the subjugation wars had reached the locals already. Mercury took that as a betrayal.

"Betrayal is a big word, you know?"

"They started acting on their own and separated from you Lord. That's clearly a betrayal."

"They can't afford to go against a royal order. Even I understand and acknowledge that."

"But..."

There was one more reason for Mercury's behavior – he was unsettled by the fact his father and the rest were just meekly following the Crown's will. The same Clan Blue that should be aiming for independence was now working for the benefit of the overlord. He suspected self-interest behind this and the fact he rebelled against such a motive highlighted his young age.

"Believe me when I say this, for I know that much – Kiel, at the very least, has not betrayed me."

“Eh?”

“I have investigated both the Clan Head’s reasons and the circumstances that led to their decision. They do not share a common goal, nevertheless, Kiel did what he did with Bandeaux in mind. This is no betrayal.”

“...Did he really?”

Mercury showed signs of relief hearing those words. He did not honestly believe that his father had betrayed Rion. However, because he was not privy to reasons behind Kiel’s decision, he had no explanation to offer. So now that Rion had hinted at the motivation and demanded no clarifications, Mercury felt relief.

“There’s really no reason to stretch it as far as betrayal. I expect them to return immediately once their mission is over.”

“I understand, Lord.”

Actually, Rion thought that none of the Heads committed treason. What he said was designed to dissolve the worries of clan members remaining in the Barony. However, he had also purposefully avoided going into details of what he had found out when he had investigated the issue.

The reason why the clan leaders went along with Maria and the Crown Prince was the simple fact they finally understood the reality of their situation. They might have been unmatched in the demon subjugation wars so far, but interacting with the Knights and the Army forced them to accept a cold, harsh truth – they would never win a full-on war against such a force. They had feared so before, yet still dared to hope anyway, but this mission woke them up from the daydream. Independence for Bandeaux was impossible.

Having been forced to face the hard truth and figure out a new way forward, they split into two camps.

One party, headed by Apollo and Cassius, advocated elevating the status of Bandeaux as a Kingdom member through military achievements under the Crown Prince.

Kiel, on the other hand, advocated leaving the future of the territory in the hands of Rion and the next generation. Mo-Heitor agreed with this proposition.

They went along with Apollo's plan with relations between Rion and the young clansmen in mind. Kiel aside, relationship the Clan Heads had with Rion was frosty at best and didn't seem to be improving with time. Therefore, if the young Frey was to put down roots in Bandeaux, the distractions caused by the old guard had to be removed. Having them separated by hundreds of miles of distance would be a good start and would definitely help his interactions with the upcoming generation of the clansmen.

This had been what Rion had found out about the matter. All four of them, in their own way, had done what they thought best for Bandeaux, so their deed could not be called treason. However the split in their intentions could not be made known publicly, or it might affect unity of the clans at home. Something Rion was acutely aware of.

"With that cleared, can we start the meeting now?"

"Yes Lo-, hmm?"

Mercury's eyes, for the first time today, rested on Sol. That was because the knight was following Rion exactly in the place Mercury should occupy as a personal guard.

"...Who are you?"

"Ah, true, I have not yet introduced myself. Sol Aristes, Royal Guard..."

"A Royal Guardsman!?"

Mercury's eyes opened wide like saucers, he had obviously misunderstood.

"Not my guard. He was sent here by the Crown."

Rion explained in order to clear the confusion away.

"Ah, so that was the case. That's obvious, I am Lord Rion's guard, after all."

Mercury was visibly relieved, but Sol picked up the conversation.

"...You? A personal guard of Viscount Frey?"

"What? Do you have complaints to make?"

“Do you even have the ability to actually be of use in that role?”

“Ability?”

“Are you strong enough to protect him? Smart enough to offer suggestions? And before all that, does he even trust you enough to accept you in this role?”

“...Like you have any right to ask those questions!”

Not being able to refute any of the questions, all that Mercury could do was to yell.

“But I do. I am a personal guard to the royal family, the best of the best. I cannot stomach someone unworthy laying a claim to the profession.”

“...Do not just decide my worth on your own.”

“Prove me wrong then.”

“Bring it on! Let’s have a duel! I’ll make you recognize my strength!”

“Oh, by all means! I will teach you the folly of proclaiming yourself a personal guard on your own!”

The two of them became increasingly fired up as the conversation progressed, but Rion just wanted to start the conference already and, for him, this was nothing but a bother.

“Can this wait? Or can you take this elsewhere, at least? I have a serious meeting to conduct here.”

So he just coldly interrupted their verbal joust.

“...Later, then.”

And just like this, the duel was postponed. It had no meaning for Mercury without Rion present to acknowledge his prowess. Sol’s actual feelings were the same, even though the Knight did not realize it himself.

# Chapter 61

## The Neighbor's Envoy

The day of the duel between Mercury and Sol had arrived. Actually, “duel” was too grand of a word, as there was no contest to be had. Mercury may have been a prodigy with only a couple of rivals in Bandeaux within his generation, but the opponent this time was too difficult for him and the fight was settled almost instantly.

Sol was among the handpicked elites of the Royal Guard, one predicted to soon take the seat of the strongest in the organization. There was no way Mercury would be able to win against him.

At present time, of course. If the young Blau were to diligently polish his skills and push himself, it was very likely he would reach, or even surpass, Sol's level. After all, his father, Kiel, was still presently stronger than the guardsman.

The current difference between them came from the fact that one simply trained his swordsmanship every day like a young man belonging to a powerful family would and the other was trained with the assumption that war could break out at any moment. To put it simply, it was the difference between a military man and a civilian. Mercury and his group still were naive in certain ways.

“Hey!?”

Sol called out to Rion once the duel was over.

“Hmm? What's the matter?”

“How can you even ask? I am aware that you are busy but how about actually watching the contests involving your subordinates?”

Although Rion was present at the place of the bout, he spent that time reading correspondence. And Sol was rebuking him for that.

“You know, having improved a little bit over the past months, I'm no longer blind to obvious differences in skill. The outcome was clear before you even started.”

“Even if that is the case, is watching the battles of your vassals not your duty as their lord?”

“I agreed to this exercise to force Mercury to confront reality. It was never about the battle itself, hence watching it was pointless.”

Rion agreed to this farce so that the new generation of clansmen would not falter upon seeing the actual might of the Kingdom when they grew up like their fathers did. If, having confronted the truth, they decided to continue their quest for independence nevertheless, he would accept their decision. After all, who was he to laugh at impossible dreams? His objective was equally reckless.

“Mercury!”

“...My lord.”

“How much longer are you planning to mope?”

“Lord... I, as your guard...”

“You should know by now that I don’t need guards to fight for me in battle. I need them to plug in any openings I expose while fighting. And that can be done even by taking the blow with your body.”

Rion might have said this casually, but this was tantamount to declaring that all he needed were disposable meatshields. This was not a role easily accepted.

“Understood, Lord! I will not hesitate to offer my life!”

However, Mercury replied immediately, almost as if saying that it was an appropriate role for him.

“With this you have no more reasons to feel downhearted, correct?”

“Yes!”

Mercury’s face instantly turned from depression to delight. He took Rion’s words as being finally recognized as his personal guard.

“Then proceed to the next contest. Mock engagement, a hundred cavalry each. Go

make preparations.”

“A Cavalry Battle? Understood! Hey! It’s a mock battle! Prepare the horses!”

Mercury began instructing the members of his squad with enthusiasm and the place immediately turned busy.

“So you think that he is going to win when it comes to a cavalry clash?”

“Who knows? It’s been quite some time since I’ve last seen them in action, with me being away and all that. I don’t know to what extent they have improved themselves.”

“...Assuming they did, what then?”

“Then it’ll be your turn to confront reality.”

Rion saying this much made it clear just how strong was the cavalry of Bandeaux was, Sol suddenly felt he was tensing up.

“...I see. Even if they are young, they are still warriors of Bandeaux, huh?”

“You should prepare too. I’m looking forward to this match. I plan to watch it carefully. Very carefully.”

“...I am not your vassal.”

“True. But I thought you tagged along to learn things, no? This means I have to see what you lack. Unless you plan to do nothing and just observe passively?”

“...Fine. Do not look away for an instant, you shall see we are nothing like we were at Nyegert.”

After all, Sol hadn’t just remained idle after seeing how the Bandeaux retinue fought. He had trained the squires to make them maneuver as well as the clans, if not better.

The time he had them practice may have been rather short, but Sol was confident that they had improved considerably. He saw today as a perfect opportunity to show Rion their progress, the prospect fired him up and made him long for the battlefield.

He had, however, forgotten what Rion said to his retinue when they had been

practicing independent squad marching – that the young clansmen under Mercury had already been capable of this feat. And his immediate opponents would be exactly those young clansmen.

“Don’t stop! Go right, full speed!”

Sol was ardently commanding the riders attached to him, but his squad didn’t move as instructed. When the clansmen split into two groups going left and right, the confused squires, at a loss who to follow, briefly halted their horses.

At that moment their opponents wheeled around and attacked them. With the horses still, the royal guards were an easy target and pierced from two sides lost member after member under the blows of training spears.

“Shake them off! Just go forward!”

Sol’s orders were already too late. As his remaining troops attempted to follow, the clansmen blocked the way throwing the formation further into chaos.

Exploiting the situation, Mercury’s subordinates penetrated the gaps between the ranks of their enemies. Now, even though the fight started as an equal numbers contest, the squires felt like they were facing an enemy many times their number.

The clansmen, now split into many smaller squads, were tearing up the remaining slivers of organized resistance and the squire squad could no longer keep order. All of them, confused and milling around at a standstill were successively taken out.

“Scatter at once! We will reform at...!”

This instruction as well was already too late. Even if his riders managed to scatter and reform, there were hardly any of them left.

“The match is over! Mercury’s Unit wins!”

Rion’s voice reverberated across the field. Sol understood quickly that Rion was being considerate by stopping the fight before his group got completely eliminated. Nevertheless, he couldn’t lose any much harder anyway.

The words the Viscount spoke to him before this match proved more than true and Sol now understood how inexperienced his unit actually was.

“...So, how was it?”

Rion came over to question the dejected Sol without holding back.

“Exactly as you just saw.”

“Yeah, and it was an utter defeat. But it’s not the essence of my question. What are you going to do the next time? Will you try the same strategy? Invent a new one to counter what they did?”

“...A bit too early for reflections.”

“Eh? You have no thoughts on the subject?”

“The battle has only just ended after all.”

Sol thought that Rion was simply poking fun at his loss. Of course, Rion was not the type to waste time on such worthless pursuits when he was serious.

“You really haven’t given this any thought when it became clear you were going to lose?”

“What?”

“When the outcome was clear, halfway through the encounter, did you really not even try to analyze your opponent in case you met them again? You sure give up easily.”

“I...”

“I guess you are of no use at all then. And here I was thinking of using whatever you have come up with as a reference.”

This gave Sol a shock even stronger than the fact that he had lost to Mercury’s group. It revealed that Rion was always thinking of the future, no matter what situation he found himself in. Even if he lost once, he wouldn’t give up and instead start preparing to win next time. This was, honestly, not any kind of special way of thinking, but Sol was sure that not many in the Kingdom’s army actually diligently cultivated this kind of mindset.

He had an order from the Knight Commander to learn from Rion, but, in reality, that

was something he wished too. His goal was to learn from Rion and surpass the youth one day. However, now he suddenly realized he might be unable to do that the way he currently was.

At the same time, he felt that he could now roughly understand how did the young men of Bandeaux feel. Would he really of use to Rion himself? It was hard to serve someone when those thoughts lingered in your mind. Even harder for people who had previously had some confidence in themselves.

He also knew that coming to that realization wasn't exactly a good thing.

"We will figure out a way to win. You can be assured of that."

Never giving up. That mindset, Rion's mindset, was the important thing.

"Is that so? Well, do your best I guess. Let me just tell you this – their current way of fighting has not matured yet. It's rather hard to explain how would its final form look, just know it's not this. That much is clear to me."

And that too. The phrase "acceptable" didn't belong in Rion's vocabulary. He was always thinking how to improve the current for the better. So while Sol tried to catch up, Rion would power forward with all his might. He was a tough target to chase.

"...If that is really the case, then I vow I shall surpass that final form too."

But even so, Sol still answered with confidence. Simply pondering difficulties of the task would not do anything to help him achieve his goal.

"Oh, so that's how it is, eh? I wonder what ideas will you come up with. I guess I will also have to work hard not to lose. The first thing to do is to see the problem, and from there..."

And just like that Rion was again lost for the World, locked deep into his thoughts. Sol could only watch that with a mix of complex feelings on his face – reverence, dread, astonishment, and uneasiness.



The envoy of friendship from Orcus came earlier than expected. This was a troublesome development for Rion and the others. Especially because only twenty days had passed since the announcement of his impending arrival. There was just not enough time to carefully prepare the reception.

In the end, they had given up on formalities and received him like any other normal guest. At the end of the day, the visitor himself was partly to blame. If they still had the nerve to complain despite that, there would be no hope for any cooperation from the very beginning. Which would be counter to basic rules of foreign diplomacy.

Thankfully, it didn't really become a problem. At the very least, the envoy himself was very understanding of the situation.

"My sincere apologies for the suddenness of the visit."

"Please, no need for that. But we absolutely have to apologize for not receiving the honored guest with proper decorum."

This kind of start to the visit made everyone on the Bandeaux side feel relieved.

"I am Alexander Dante, the second prince of the Orcus Kingdom."

"And I am Rion Frey, steward of Bandeaux on behalf of His Majesty the King."

In the self-introduction that followed, the visitor had named himself as the second prince of Orcus. Knowing for certain now that they were indeed hosting royalty raised the tension of Rion's entourage once more. It was likely that this caliber of a guest was a harbinger of bad things to come. Alexander's next words, however, blew that worry out of the water.

"In that case, calling you Rion sounds appropriate."

"...Eh?"

"It would not do for a friend to be strictly formal and call you Viscount Frey."

"For a friend, you say..."

“Oh, you do have a sense of humor. That is most excellent.”

At the end of this exchange, the prince was beaming a most delighted smile and Rion was not smiling at all. He wasn't bothered by the over-familiar attitude, but he wasn't pleased by being called a Viscount. They might have been neighbors, but there was no reason for Orcus to take so much of an interest in a minor noble from across the border to even know about his very recent promotion. Obviously, he had been investigated.

“Now that your highness' wit dispelled the tension of everyone present, may we know the reason behind this visit?”

“...Oh now, why be in such a rush?”

“A sudden, unexpected, visit from foreign royalty raises a specter of all kinds of bad things. While this might be impertinent of us, knowing your highness' intentions is the only way to assuage everyone's worries.”

While Rion did want to learn the purpose, right now he was simply using it as an excuse to speed up the talks.

“Were you not told I would come as a gesture of friendship?”

“We were, highness. But none of us are diplomats, we can't help worrying about the less obvious motives.”

“Mhm. Is that so.”

Even professional diplomats wouldn't have the luxury to just take that reason at a face value. Orcus kingdom was in a formal alliance with the Gran Flamm kingdom. For this reason, it made no sense for them to single out a Viscount to deepen relations with. Prince Alexander had to have an objective that he could not raise in public.

“Have we had enough time, we would have called for someone fitting from the capital to keep your highness company. Does highness wish us to do so anyway, perhaps?”

“No, no, the matter is nowhere near as serious. We simply wish to solidify relations, or rather, to be more precise, display our gratitude.”

“Gratitude?”

“You see, towns on our side of the border are also experiencing rapid growth, albeit not to the same extent as Camargue. And this is mainly to your prompt action on maintaining safety of the roads.”

“A matter where your country’s cooperation is deeply appreciated, highness.”

“Well, compared to the hardships frequent demon appearances place on this land, we are not really doing all that much.”

“...Frequent demon appearances on “this” land?”

There was something strange with the way Alexander phrased his reply, so Rion repeated those words as a question.

“Oh, do you not know?”

Fortunately for Rion, that was something that the prince didn’t really need to hide and he did not have to strike an unwelcome bargain for the information.

“Demons don’t appear in the lands of Orcus, do they?”

“Correct.”

“The situation in the Hashu Kingdom is the same, isn’t it?”

“I am unable to offer you much detail on that, but I have not heard of any casualties over there.”

“Really...”

Rion wanted to mull over this fact right at this instant, but the situation did not allow for his usual habit of sinking deep into his thoughts.

“That is why, thanks to your actions, the trade routes shifted and go through our country now. The Merica Kingdom is apparently trying to have its border lords adapt and adjust accordingly, but, apparently, it does not go well. When it starts, though, it will bring us trouble.”

“That is true. But this kind of situation will not persist forever. The demon subjugations are going well.”

“Also thanks to your efforts, Rion. This raises a lot of complicated feeling at my court, you know. We know it is not proper to delight in the misfortune of your neighbor and wish for it to continue, but it is that exact misfortune that brought us favorable conditions.”

“This is why, highness, we have to prepare for the coming change while the fortune still smiles at us.”

The conversation started to head in the direction Rion wished it to go. He needed the cooperation of the neighboring kingdoms for the upcoming developments and it would be best if current talks paved the way for that...

“Indeed. And we would like to be able to depend on you for this very much.”

“On me?”

“I was told that safe travel is not the only thing that draws people to Camargue.”

“...Perhaps? I do not deny that we are working hard to have more attracting factors than just safe roads.”

And as expected, the talks would not be easy, because what Orcus really wanted was not a cooperation, but an one-sided favor.

“No need for humility, my friend. After all, who has not heard about Camargue and its great pleasure establishments? The best in the eastern region, apparently.”

“...Did that subject pique your interest, highness?”

It would be fine if he was interested with pleasure quarters themselves, their reputation was high and would not affect him badly. But there were places with women, alcohol and gambling there too, not something a royal should dabble in.

“Our country is so poor that it does not have any popular locations of the type. For such a country to flourish, it must offer something that other countries do not have.”

The prince might have said that, but he was actually planning to imitate Camargue. It looked like Orcus had no scruples about this kind of thing whatsoever. Rion did not consider that to be necessarily wrong, though. In his opinion, excellent rulers did not hesitate about copying others if it would make their country flourish.

“...So you plan to make the same kind of town? Don’t you fear it will hurt us both instead?”

If they really tried to make something similar on their side of the border, they would be competing for the same customer. That offered only downsides to Bandeaux.

“No need to worry, our plans involve a different location and a different border.”

“A border with Merica Kingdom, by any chance?”

“...Indeed.”

Kingdom of Orcus didn’t border Gran Flamm only, of course. They also shared borders with Hashu Kingdom in the north, Merica in the south, and one more country further to the east. There was a lot of traffic in the vicinity of that southern border, which was why the prince would not be willing depart with nothing despite outwardly coming only to profess gratitude.

“Still, your plans will negatively impact our revenue. Majority of our customers come from your Kingdom after all.”

“This may indeed happen. Nevertheless...”

“That’s why, I believe there’s no need to come and tell us if you’re planning to make a town of this type on your own. It’s not like we have the right or ability to interfere with your plans.”

“...I was hoping we could use your town as a reference.”

Of course, things were not as easy as Rion made them sound. Camargue didn’t make its name on infrastructure only, what made it so highly valued was the quality of service.

And Prince Alexander wished to copy precisely that. Truly a selfish request.

“Reference? Is this about how our merchants conduct their business, highness?”

“Precisely so.”

“...I wonder about that, though? From my experience, merchants dislike parting with

their secrets.”

“True. But it would be much easier if Rion put in a good word for us.”

“Me? I might be their lord, but I don’t believe I have that much influence.”

“Oh, I am sure you can find a way.”

“No, I don’t think this is possible for me.”

“I disagree, Rion. They are merchants, threaten to revoke their licenses and they will do as told.”

“...Oh.”

This made it clear that Alexander, at the very least, was not a person to put much trust in. Still, saying this right now would be imprudent so Rion kept his tongue.

“So, how about it?”

“What about the effects of such a move? Incurring the ire of our merchants will only result in a decrease of tax yield and cause much loss to the territory. With this, even if it’s a prince’s request, I have to decline.”

“...I am sure we could arrange for a sufficient compensation.”

“Then how about removing the taxes for those merchants who wish to do business in my territory?”

Allowing the conversation to end on a vague promise would be a mistake, so Rion brought up a concrete proposal.

“Removal of customs duty, eh?”

The prince did not look surprised, this was clearly within the other side’s expectations.

“With the tariffs gone, more merchants should come to our town. It’s unclear whether it will be enough to compensate for lost income, but it would be a start.”

“...This tariff suspension... Would it involve all the tariffs on our border with the Gran

Flamm kingdom?”

“No, just those on people wishing to do business in my town. Incidentally, it should apply on all of your borders.”

Prince Alexander questioned the scope as if it was to be potentially a very serious concession, but unexpectedly Rion wanted even more. The prince’s little scheme to make negotiations for his side easier backfired spectacularly.

“That would be unreasonable. If we allow people to cross our borders freely, how can we tell where they actually aim to do business, if at all?”

“Why not charge them anyway, then? Once they come here my administration will issue them a certificate which will be a proof required to claim back the money.”

“Hmm...”

With this, the proposal started to sound plausible and the prince started to give it a serious thought.

And it wasn’t like he was as concerned about the customs duty as he made it look. Despite their overt alliance, Kingdom of Orcus was, in fact, a vassal of Gran Flamm and the tariffs between them were already low. The tax from other borders might have been lucrative at present, but the government was fully aware that this was a temporary situation. This was why they were looking for alternative measures for the future. And why they weren’t really all that concerned about the future tariff income.

“So, highness, how about it?”

“The proposal is worthy of consideration.”

“Is that so? In that case, we will await your decision eagerly. When does highness plan to visit us again?”

“On second thought, I believe the matter is acceptable and that there is no need to bother Father with the minutiae.”

It was the prince’s turn to find himself in a situation where suspension of the talks as they were was inconvenient. After all, it was his Kingdoms that sought Rion’s cooperation, an artificial delay was not in their interest.

“Oh, really?”

“Absolutely. I was given sufficient authority to make the decision.”

“I understand. Sadly I lack such leeway and need to refer to the officials in the capital. Given the time this is likely to take, I believe that it would be best for highness to return home for now.”

Rion did not need to hurry. As long as he made his decision before merchants started to return to the old trade routes on the Merican side of the border, things would turn out fine.

“...Is that so?”

For the first time in this conversation, Prince Alexander looked dejected.

“Unless highness wants to try the other method of learning how our merchants conduct business? By becoming their customer?”

“A customer...”

“But, of course, it would be unreasonable to expect a prince to visit a brothel. Designating a subordinate might be prudent.”

“While the idea sounds sensible...”

All of the prince’s attendants were people of high standing, the thought of visiting a brothel sat ill with them.

“I see how a brothel might seem an impossible destination. But highness must know that there’s a special reason why Camargue’s ladies are called the best in the east. A reason that makes thinking of them as simple prostitutes rather unreasonable.”

However, Rion invited them anyway and their social status was what he was after.

“Explain?”

“They can refuse a customer they dislike. All of the elite flowers of Camargue are free to choose and reject their patrons. This may not be true for the cheaper courtesans, but we’re not talking of those.”

“They can refuse a customer?”

“Yes highness, they will never accompany someone they do not like.”

“Is that not bad for the business?”

“Arguably. But pride over money. That’s the mindset of our most elite courtesans. On the other hand, if one of them decides to offer herself to someone, it clearly shows that the man chosen is not an ordinary person.”

“Mhm, I see...”

“I think the reputation that comes from being accepted by the best of them is beyond value.”

“...I see.”

The prince swallowed Rion’s sales pitch hook, line, and sinker and ended up completely agreeing with what Rion said. Exactly as Rion expected.

“Does highness feel like trying?”

And a final provocation, a taunt to prince’s self-confidence. One Alexander found impossible to deflect.

And thus a new facet was added to Camargue’s shining reputation.

A place where courtesans refuse even foreign princes. Where wealth stands for nothing and where one will not find company without being a capable man. Those who were confident and wanted to make a name for themselves were welcome to try their luck.

According to the rumors spreading alongside the invitations, that is.

# Chapter 62

## The Two People That Don't Mesh

After the meeting with Prince Alexander of Orcus concluded, Rion sat still in silence for some time. There were various things to think through, many of them concerning, mentioned during that discussion.

But the starkest of those concerns was the fact that the demons appeared on the Gran Flamm soil only. If this were to be confirmed as true, the consequences would be many and wide-ranging.

"Have you happened to come across any information regarding the demon presence in other kingdoms?"

Lacking sufficient information to develop his train of thought further, Rion decided to question Sol for now.

"I know nothing on the subject."

"...Useless. You lack even such crucial intelligence."

"This concerns other countries, hence it is not something a guardsman needs to know."

"Even if it heralds a possible war?"

"It does what?"

Sol scowled slightly, but not from surprise. He was frustrated by not being able to arrive at the same conclusion as Rion after witnessing the same discussion.

"Demons appear in this country only. A not insignificant part of the army is now completely tied up by the demon subjugation, to the point that certain areas are now undermanned... Do you believe all of the Kingdom's neighbors friendly? Will they let such an opportunity slip by? "

"...No... Not at all."

Far from being surrounded by friends, the Kingdom had borders with a potential enemy in Merika and two rather unwilling puppet states in Hashu and Orcus. Other neighbors were not much better. They feared Gran Flamm's strength, but they also envied its prosperity. If any of them had designs on some of that wealth, now was their perfect chance to act.

"But then, if war is truly coming, that woman should know."

A foreign invasion while the country was busy subjugating the devils. If such a thing was to occur, Maria should know about it more than anyone. After all, saving the country from perils was her role.

"But I guess just because she knows doesn't mean she'd say anything, eh?"

"What are you trying to say?"

Rion was just talking to himself at this point but Sol, as expected, couldn't let the conversation die at this point. For him, the possible outbreak of a war was too important a topic.

"...Do you know who am I referring to?"

"Maria Theodore, of course. Who else do you refer to in that kind of manner?"

"Yes, her. Hmm, looks like despite knowing that much, you still don't know what I'm talking about, huh?"

"...And it is very frustrating."

This was frustrating to Sol, just as he had said. Still, he had no choice but to accept that he could not comprehend a single thing about it at all.

"Well, that's normal, isn't it? I would have to start suspecting your character if you said you understood this."

Sol's honest confession met an unexpected reaction and the number of things the guardsman didn't understand grew by one.

"Can you please explain properly?"

“That woman knows the future of the demon subjugation. You know this, right?”

“I do.”

“Then, why does she not try to change it?”

“...Why should she?”

That future led to the Devil’s defeat, Sol saw no reason to meddle with it.

“That depends on how much she knows. Let’s take the currently unknown place where the demons appear from, their base. Don’t you think she could be able to unravel that mystery?”

“...Ah, so that is what you are talking about.”

The devil base location was still unknown. But possibly not to Maria. After all, if she knew where the final battle was supposed to happen, that meant she knew where they came from too. The same way she directed the war effort by knowing where they would strike next.

“That woman says she fears subtle changes bringing about an unfavorable result. This is a reasonable worry and no one can blame her for this. But is that really all there is to her inaction?”

“...I think not.”

Rion had been removed from the war effort to prevent him from making more of a name for himself by continuous accumulation of battlefield merit.

When one looked for instigators, Maria’s name came up as a likely suspect. After all, she should have been the person to play the leading part. Sol didn’t think she was able to achieve that deed on her own, but he thought her very likely to be involved in the matter.

And that made it clear her primary goal was not minimizing the number of casualties, it was obtaining personal achievements.

“I can offer no proof, but believe me when I say that woman will not shy away from sacrificing others and she will not rest until the role of the protagonist is hers. If she

only knew that getting all the battle merit is not the same as having the main role...”

Nobody could possibly know that Rion was right now hinting at the truth behind this world. The people living here were unaware of the existence of the game, hints like mentioning a “protagonist” wouldn’t be enough to change that.

“Oddly, the little lady’s knowledge seems to have gaps. Do you also find this troubling?”

As far as Maria was concerned, the past two battles had been full of miscalculations, a fact Sol did not miss. He was content to allow her to prioritize her own success, but not necessarily so if it would bring harm to the Kingdom as a result.

“Oh that... That’s quite troubling indeed.”

Rion was worried about that fact, although for a different reason than Sol. Having the strongest demon types right from the start ran counter to the common knowledge that the strength of the game enemies would match the growth of the protagonist.

“Do you have an idea why that may be?”

“None at all... I do wonder though.”

The truth was, one possibility did come to Rion’s mind. It was possible that the strength of the enemy was determined by the overall and not personal strength of the protagonist. Maria had gotten the recognition and blessing of the Kingdom from the very beginning and, accordingly, the army she had taken to past battles was of considerable size. Even without Rion and his strength, the Kingdom should be able to win, albeit with significant losses. Thinking of those two engagements in the game terms, they would make for challenging encounters between two sides of similar power.

However, it would be impossible to explain that idea to Sol.

“Is that so. That makes me worried about their next battle.”

“Yeah. That woman seems to be making them do unnecessary things too.”

“Unnecessary things?”

“Simultaneous battles with troops split into numerous units.”

“She what?”

It was the same way of fighting that Rion had employed in the previous campaign. A style Sol had decreed feasible only for a genius commander.

“And even though there seems to be no need to go through such troublesome things in the present campaign. Oh well, if that woman put that much thought into it, I guess things should be fine.”

“Absolutely not! There is now way she is up to the task, is she?”

“Why is that?”

“That strategy is something only a genius can execute.”

“It went fine when I did it, though?”

“Well... You are a genius.”

Sol felt somewhat unwilling to complement Rion directly in this manner.

“Flattery won’t get you anywhere.”

“And that kind of humility is disgusting. I, at the very least, am not capable of it.”

“...Even though all you need is some calculations?”

“Calculations?”

Sol thought that this kind of approach required a genius-like ability to visualize a detailed map and troop movements inside one’s head. In his opinion, less talented people would be able to imitate that to a certain extent on a limited battlefield, as could he in some capacity. But what Rion had done took that concept to a completely different level.

“You know that having two sides of a triangle lets you calculate the third, right?”

“Haa?”

Sol did not, still, Rion continued speaking undeterred.

“For example, let’s call the line connecting units A and B side X. If you know that unit A is heading towards destination C, unit B can just send a messenger to Destination C. The distance between the starting point of A and destination C makes side Y then the travel distance the messenger has to cover to get there is side Z But that’s just one of the possible situations, there are others too...”

“Wait a minute! I understand nothing of this!”

Of course, he wouldn’t. Trigonometry was not something necessary for a guardsman and besides, even if Sol studied it, it would be very hard for him to understand Rion’s explanations.

“...Have you really never learned about things like that? Regardless, that woman’s knowledge in this area is wider than mine. She should be more than capable of necessary calculations.”

“How can you know that?”

“I remember her grades from the Royal Academy. To my knowledge, she always got the top marks.”

This was a lie. Rion’s conviction came from the fact that Maria was also an otherworlder.

But by assuming this would be enough, he was actually greatly mistaken. It was not possible to repeat what he had done simply by knowing some advanced math. Attempting such a thing would stumble due to the fact initial values were not accurate, mistimings and miscalculations were inevitable.

Rion succeeded only because he could intuitively compensate for those inaccuracies on the fly. In the end, it was just as Sol had said, he had talent surpassing normal people.

“...Even if that is the case, you also think it is impossible for her in this situation, right?”

Sol instinctively picked up on Rion’s misconception. However, he knew that the young lord would not understand the problem at all, so he decided to leave the subject be.

“I bet. It worked for us because the detached forces’ numbers were limited. In the first place, it’s not a strategy someone with sufficient amount of force should be pursuing. If she is aiming to get the demons before they concentrate their forces, she should just

deploy troops in places where they are expected to appear.”

“...What if more than expected show up?”

“You withdraw. The difference in numbers ceases to be a factor and, as your dispersed units gather, disappears altogether. If that’s not enough and you’re still at a disadvantage, you use other means to even up the odds. A defensive battle within a castle, for example.”

“...So, by the book?”

This kind of strategy was no means revolutionary. It was the most sensible way to proceed for a commander that wanted to lower the casualties on his side.

“Our opponent is demons, there’s no need for fancy solutions to deal with them. We already have found a strategy that promises victory, it’s best to focus on it and just try not to screw up.”

“That is true.”

Just when Sol started to think Rion was the man that prized ingenuity, the young man voiced this kind of an opinion. The longer Sol spent at his side, the less he understood Rion’s true nature.

“But I guess if that woman were to do that, the victory would belong to the army, not to her. And if I know her, she loathes that idea completely.”

“Really... I have to say, though, your knowledge of the current military situation is impressive. Did you leave some of those messengers behind, perhaps?”

“I did. But this information comes from His Highness and Lady Lanchester.”

“Haa?”

“For some reason, they sent me a letter with the particulars of the situation. They’re even asking for my opinion, even though it took a month for the message to arrive here and it’ll take as much for any reply to reach them. The battle will be well over by that time, so it’s kind of meaningless, don’t you agree?”

“Maybe they want to use that as a reference for the next battle?”

Charlotte aside, Sol understood the intentions of the Crown Prince. Arnold had the same objective as him, to learn Rion's way of fighting.

"...That does not make any sense. If he has time for that, he should spend it on more productive pursuits."

"The demon invasion is the most pressing issue of the day, no?"

"For the next king? Is this kingdom so short of hands that the heir to the crown himself must head to the battlefield?"

"That... Is probably not the case, I think."

"Well, I guess everything should be fine since His Majesty, the King, is still present. The biggest problem for me is how to avoid getting entangled in troublesome things."

"Troublesome things?"

"Are you playing the fool? Or just entirely oblivious?"

"...The latter, I guess."

Sol honestly didn't know what Rion was talking about this time. Not because he was slow witted, but because the image of Rion he had constructed in his mind didn't exactly match the reality.

"Are you kidding? Why do you think the Prince of the Orcus Kingdom came here?"

"Ah, that, even I would know that. To recruit."

"...Say again?"

Sol's answer was not only well different to what Rion was thinking of but also completely outside Rion's expectations.

"They're trying to recruit you for their court. Wasn't that the reason for their probing? That Prince truly was looking for friendship. With you only, that is."

"...Wasn't that reconnaissance?"

“Oh, that too. Knowing the current situation of Bandeaux gives them better idea of your actual worth”

“Like I’d go to the Orcus Kingdom.”

“How could they know that? Your circumstances and attitude to the Crown Prince are not exactly secret. It is reasonable to expect you can be convinced to defect.”

“...Why would they even try?”

Rion’s low self-esteem had actually blinded him to the fact he might have been scouted for recruitment.

“Look who is playing the fool now. To enrich their kingdom and to strengthen their army among other things, I find it hard to believe you wouldn’t know what their end goal is.”

“Countries and territories are two different things. And even if they somehow managed to succeed, how long would it take? The right moment to attack the Kingdom of Gran Flamm is now. It may be impossible on their own, but if they get help from Merica and others, their chances improve dramatically.”

“The Kingdom is not that soft of a target.”

“Oh, I wonder? If the attackers planned well, taking the capital is the very least they could achieve. The demons are on a rampage in the outlying regions causing the central parts of the Kingdom to be considerably short of troops. Furthermore, the regions bordering Merica directly, , the South in particular, afraid of repeat of the scenes before Harcourt, concentrated their garrisons in strategic locations. An enemy that splits his army to bypass those strongpoints can go straight for the throat and take the Capital City.”

Sol was completely amazed. Just from hearing not that long ago that other countries are not plagued by the demons, Rion was able to come up with a bunch of not even surprising, but straight outrageous, plans. And on top of that, he was fully aware of the situation in the south for some reason.

This was so much that he was starting to believe his earlier suspicions that he had been sent here to keep the boy under observation.

“...Anything else?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Schemes to capture the capital. You have alternative plans, right?”

“I don’t. With that one being viable, there’s no need for others, is there?”

“In that case, prepare a written report about the details of this one and send it to the capital.”

“Why would I?”

“So that countermeasures are prepared, of course! Do you want to just watch the capital fall?!”

“...”

Rion left that without a reply, sulking in silence just like a child. He wasn’t unhappy at Sol, but at himself for blundering and saying too much.

“Are you displeased?”

“...Not at all.”

This question made Rion turn his head away in an exaggerated manner. A very childish behavior, but this was also part of him. Thinking just about his age, he was unmistakably still only a kid.

But this exact kid just invented an outrageous scheme to topple the nation’s capital giving Sol a good idea of just how dangerous Rion could be.



Being pressured by Sol to make a report to the Kingdom had put Rion into a bad mood and he had set aside the remaining government affairs of the day. There was only one person able to accompany him when he felt like this – Ariel.

“That bastard. Forcing me to write those things.”

“Still sulking? It is Rion’s fault for having that slip of the tongue.”

“I know that. What I actually hate is the fact he had me write something that just came to my mind. Even though there’s still so much time to consider it further before it was plausible.”

Mulling over things like that was a source of enjoyment for Rion. Being forced to pen them down in an incomplete state was very unsatisfying.

“What does Rion think would happen if he sent a polished version to the capital later on?”

There was no chance he’d be praised for a good work. On the contrary, people would be more wary of him for coming up with those kinds of ideas.

“...Oh, you’re right.”

“And besides, if Merica were to conquer the capital, we would have our chance stolen from under our nose.”

“That’s not true. Even if the capital were to be captured, there would probably just be a reversal event of some sort.”

“I guess. But, before that happens, numerous lives would be lost. The slums are in the capital, remember?”

“...Ah, that’s true.”

The dwellers of the slum were people Rion felt he had to protect. They were certainly not disposable for the sake of his revenge.

“How nice. Rion has to thank Sol.”

“Why would I thank that bastard?”

“If the capital figures out a countermeasure, the slums will be protected. All thanks to Sol who made Rion write that report.”

“...That may be the case. But...”

Even that argument was not enough for Rion to get over his disquiet. This piqued Ariel's interest, the animosity those two men had between each other was strange.

"What does Rion think of that man?"

"In what way?"

"Let us take his abilities. For example, what does Rion think of him as a subordinate?"

"...He is extremely proficient. But just that. You cannot feel any sort of passion coming from him. With that attitude, he won't be of any use at all."

"That is probably due to him losing the one he should serve. Aside from that person, for Sol, there must be nothing else worth pouring passion into."

"That's ancient history, he shouldn't keep dragging that baggage with him."

As she expected, Rion's assessment of Sol was really strict, but she couldn't think of a reason for that.

"That just shows how strong Sol's sense of loyalty is. Is Rion not going to put any stock in that?"

It was the same kind of loyalty Rion still had for Vincent. From Ariel's perspective, the two of them weren't that dissimilar.

"To someone he never met? I cannot comprehend that kind of loyalty at all."

"Sol may not have met the person who he should be serving, but that relationship was something decided before that person's birth."

"...What do you mean?"

"It seems that he was a frequent visitor while Her Majesty was pregnant, saying that he must be there every day before she gives birth."

"Sol is earnest. Even though he himself was still a child as well, he held a strong sense of duty. Looking forward to the day her highness gives birth, he kept going to the Queen's side. And yet, he somehow missed the day when Her Majesty had given birth."

“Why?”

“The birth was quite the difficult one and took a lot of time. He kept awake all night, waiting, but when the morning came he ended up falling asleep. The child was kidnapped during the time he was being carried to his room. He felt really responsible for that.”

The only people that had remained in the Queen’s chambers once Sol had been carried away had been the Queen herself and the midwife. Once the mother had learned that she had given birth to a child with heterochromia, she had entrusted it to the midwife to spirit away. Fortunately for them, most of the castle residents had been asleep at the time. Of course, Sol knew nothing of what had happened that morning.

Sol, as a child, had thought this would not have happened had he kept awake and had ended up feeling responsible. He might even have been under that impression exactly because he had been a child.

“Then he should just continue searching for that princess. Lamenting his loss without doing anything won’t lead to any sort of progress.”

“...Saying that so lightly is pitiful of him.”

“You are soft on him, Ari. I’m aware that it’s difficult to find her. However, you won’t be able to accomplish anything if you do nothing.”

“That may be right, but...”

“And if she really is someone worth serving, then he will meet her naturally one way or another. Just like how I met Lord Vincent.”

“If you say so...”

Ariel was not certain whether the meeting between Sol and Rion was a natural occurrence. She did, however, think that they might need one like that to make both of them think that way.

A destined meeting, just like how Vincent and Rion had met at the slums of all places. Sadly, it was too late to hope for something like that. A first encounter could be had only once.

# Chapter 63

## Who is the real villain here?

On their way back to the capital after the latest demon subjugation, Crown Prince Arnold was sitting at a restaurant table, sighing deeply over a letter delivered to him. The contents of it were roughly in line with his expectations and he was regretting the fact his ideas were rejected.

This time, the subjugation was conducted close to the western border of the country. So close, in fact, that there were no large population centers that needed defending. And yet, the punitive force had still chosen to employ the strategy that Rion had used during the previous subjugation.

Their army had been split into many units that had been deployed across the operation area. All of them had been ordered to face demon group closest to them once noticed. This strategy had meant to not allow any damage to even a single town or city. However, the prince had had doubts about the plan itself. He had been of a mind that they had enough troops this time to set up enough defensive lines in the area without having to disperse the troops into smaller units.

However, many of the commanders had been overly fixated on imitating what Rion had managed to do and his opinion was not able to sway the final decision. The outcome of the fight had ultimately been good anyway, but Arnold still felt miserable for being talked into following the opinions of others.

The Crown Prince was sure that if Rion were to be here, he would manage to impose his own will. Or at least, if he had no support, he would see his plans through with his own means somehow to show everyone they were wrong.

When compared to Rion, Arnold had done nothing. He, the Crown Prince, couldn't even control his own surroundings.

"Haa... Why did this happen?"

"Eh?"

Suddenly, Arnold heard a question that seemed to straight out give a voice to his feelings. It was Charlotte and she too was reading newly received letters.

“Ah, my apologies, highness. Just talking to myself aloud.”

Charlotte realized that she voiced her inner frustration from Arnold’s reaction.

“I see...”

“Does highness mind me joining at the table?”

“Not at all.”

Getting Arnold’s affirmation, Charlotte changed her seats. But that didn’t exactly mean she had something to discuss. She just focused her attention back on the letter that she had received.

She was finally alone with the Crown Prince, yet she ignored him completely. Something unthinkable in the past.

“What are you reading?”

This, in turn, piqued the Prince’s interest in the contents of the correspondence.

“A letter from Rion, highness. Now that I am leading his Clan Yellow force, I decided to ask what should I do. His reply just arrived.”

“Is that so...”

The Crown Prince was a little surprised by the fact that Charlotte had done the same thing as he. In fact, the similarity was superficial, since the girl’s motives were entirely different. She didn’t really care about the contents of the reply, what was important and enjoyable to her was the exchange of letters with Rion itself.

“He gave not a shred a military advice, just a description of their personalities.”

“Personalities?”

“For example – “The clan leader, Apollo, may seem coarse on the outside but he is proud and easy to offend, so be careful with him. But as long as you show that you’re

relying on him, he will answer.” Or – “He is the type to get ahead of himself so be strict when the situation demands it.”“

“...He seems to have excellent grasp of his subordinates.”

“Undoubtedly. However, if he knows this much, I wonder why he acts that way?”

“Now that mentioned it...”

From the perspective of an outsider, the relationship between Rion and the Clan Heads, with the exception of Kiel perhaps, didn’t seem to be very harmonious. And the most recent scheme to separate them from him was hatched exactly because that was the case.

However, in the letter that Charlotte had received there were detailed descriptions of their personalities and best ways to treat them. Detailed enough to imply there should be no real discord between the two parties.

“What is he thinking, I wonder?”

“...I have no idea. By all rights, he should be resenting me, yet he still properly replies to all my letters. I am grateful, of course, but I wonder too.”

“...What did highness ask Rion about?”

Charlotte was perfectly aware of the fact that Rion held a grudge against Arnold. And because she very much wanted to avoid those kinds of serious subjects, she changed the topic.

“The strategy of the most recent subjugation. I had doubts, so I sought his opinion.”

“Did it differ from yours, highness?”

Looking at how dejected the Crown Prince was, Charlotte assumed that to be the case. She was wrong, though.

“No, we are of the same mind.”

“Eh?”

“Furthermore, knowing that he agreed with me reassured me that I was right all along. And made the fact that I was not listened to all the more frustrating.”

“May that be the difference in sense of responsibility?”

“...Difference in sense of responsibility?”

This suggestion was something Arnold expected the least.

“Rion attempts to shoulder everything himself. That is why he is willing and able push through with his plans. Highness, however, is mindful of the responsibility of others. Which is why you do not try to force matters in a similar manner.”

“Do you really think so? If that is true, I risk turning into someone that shirks responsibility and pushes it on others.”

The prospect depressed Arnold even more, but Charlotte wasn’t finished.

“I do not think that attitude to be wrong, highness. Being like Rion, trying to carry everything on your shoulders is just sad, reckless. Too sad. Other people end up not being able to leave you be and... Ah, I am rambling, am I not?”

“Y-Yeah.”

It seemed that when it came to the subject of Rion, Charlotte ceased to be the Charlotte Arnold knew. He thought it wiser to remain silent about this, though. It would make for a very awkward conversation.

“Passing responsibility to other people means giving them authority. Is that quality not something a crown prince and the future king needs?”

“...Having it framed in this manner, it is a sentiment hard to disagree with.”

No king was able to run the whole government alone. They tended to have a huge number of subordinates. A necessarily huge number of subordinates. The crux of Charlotte’s argument was this difference in Arnold’s and Rion’s positions. And it did initially improve the Crown Prince’s mood.

“Which is why there is no need to worry about it, highness.”

“...However, is such a quality not necessary for Rion as well?”

Rion, after all, was a territory lord too. The scale might not be comparable to governing a whole country, but the basic principle was the same and entrusting things to subordinates was a must.

“Rather than necessary...”

Charlotte’s reply was quite vague but Arnold immediately saw the reason behind it. It wasn’t as if Rion was chronically unable to delegate, but the truth was quite hard for Charlotte to speak about.

“So that is the reason. He is not acknowledging his subordinates on purpose.”

“...I believe that to be the case.”

“Believe? Do you not understand how he thinks?”

“I can mostly understand what is he thinking of, but the way he gets there still eludes me.”

“...I think I can actually somehow understand him.”

“Eh!?”

Charlotte found this completely unexpected. From her perspective, those two looked like complete opposites. She thought there was no way the Prince would be able to understand Rion.

“He is trying to avoid having them involved, right?”

“...Involved in what, highness?”

“That is not something that should be explained in this place. But I believe the same reason prompted him to attempt saving Vincent from the execution on his own, without any outside help.”

“...Is that so.”

Invoking the case of Vincent helped Charlotte to understand. Trying to save a criminal

from execution was a grave crime and a challenge to the Kingdom. It was completely normal for people attempting that to face the same punishment.

And Rion, presently, was trying to do something of a similar caliber. A plan that once realized would mean high treason.

It didn't take much effort to figure out what he was aiming at.

"...I guess, highness, that the right question, in that case, is – how can we make him stop?"

Charlotte wanted to stop Rion, no matter what kind of revenge plan he had on his mind. She just didn't want him to die.

"I talked to Ariel about this, you know."

"Eh?"

"I told her not to let Rion be bound by such dark feelings. That Vincent would not wish it either. Whether she will heed my words, I know not, but I felt I had to say it."

"Why do so much for Rion's sake, highness?"

Rion had been, after all, Arnold's bitter love rival. Charlotte couldn't comprehend why the Crown Prince would show that much care about how the young Frey wished to live his life.

"I wonder? Honestly, I do not know myself. I feel it would be a waste to lose someone with such talent. To let him rot away on the shadowy paths when he could be walking in the light. Especially now, when he is no longer a valet."

"...There are times, highness, when I think that the purpose of Vincent's life was precisely to drag Rion out of the darkness. I will never say it to those two, of course, but I feel that Vincent was meant to live, and die, for Rion."

"...That is neither a nice thing to say nor something I would agree with. And it does not make my sins any easier to forgive"

If Rion was someone bound by the chains of revenge, then Arnold was someone suffering from the chains of regret.

“How unlike of your highness to be lamenting the past misdeeds.”

“How unlike me indeed...”

The spirit and vigor that the Crown Prince used to be praised for by everyone, could be felt from him no longer. Something Arnold was very aware of himself.

“However, the current Prince Arnold, one who worries about the grief of others, is much more of a delight than his past self.”

“Eh?”

“As a person, of course. I would still pick Rion as a man, but we both can agree that as a person, he does have problems, right?”

As Charlotte was frankly declaring her feelings towards Rion with a truly worried face, she radiated so much charm that it eclipsed even her captivating looks.

“Charlotte..... I also think that the present you is most wonderful indeed.”

Which prompted the Prince to honestly say so.

“...A marriage between us is no longer possible, highness.”

“I know. I am now able to see things I was blind to before. I understand that you are here only because of your feelings for Rion.”

The brilliance of Ariel that the crown prince had fallen for had been brought about by her feelings towards Rion as well. It was a truism that women who had fallen in love tended to be at their most beautiful. If only past Arnold had known that falling for that kind of woman, was not necessarily a foolish thing...



The Crown Prince had grown, unlike someone who had shown no growth at all. That someone would be Maria, the protagonist, of course. It might have been true that she was originally an adult already and it would not be strange for her to display maturity unbecoming of her young age, but things didn't turn out that way. Keeping in mind that she had been a university student in her former world, her current self, after nearly seventeen years in this world, was much older.

But even if she was not, her ever-selfish personality was not something that one could grow out of upon reaching adulthood.

“Just as I thought, it was really thanks to the Bandeaux Army.”

Having finally gained achievements in the devil subjugation that she had desired all along, Maria was in quite a good mood.

“Rather than the Bandeaux Army, was this actually not thanks to us?”

And so was Lancelot, finally able to show results demanded from the heir to a marquess house.

“If you really think that, we ought to crush that army here and now, no?”

Erwin too was satisfied, but he had not lost the sight of his main objective. He didn’t care about recognition, his one and only aim, as a person with an undisputed right to inherit House Windhill, was to crush those he deemed a threat. And that meant taking Rion’s strength away from him.

“We cannot do that yet. Our battles are about to get harsher.”

“...And you really think that the Bandeaux Army’s strength is necessary? I concur with Sir Lancelot, our personal power had the highest impact on the battlefield.”

This was not conceit. The clan forces were now more numerous and lead by five people excelling in magic. Their overall impact was incomparable to when they had been led by Rion alone.

“The upcoming battles will be different. Many lives will be lost.”

“...And they shall be disposed of then. I see.”

“Don’t underestimate the devils. The real battles are yet to start.”

Maria didn’t give Erwin a straight answer. She no longer needed to pretend to be a good person in front of those two, but old habits died hard.

“Speaking of that, could you tell us what is coming already? If the fighting is going to be as hard as you say, the earlier we start planning, the better.”

“You’re right on that. Fine then. I’ll tell you.”

“You have our undivided attention.”

Maria had always been hogging the knowledge for herself. Her pretext was that all the information she had would be rendered worthless if a corrupt government official leaked it to the enemy, but Lancelot and Erwin had seen through that lie a long time ago. They figured out there must have been something she couldn’t speak about, even if the reason eluded them so far.

So having her agree to reveal some of her hand came as a surprise to both of the boys.

“Our next stage will be a war.”

“...What?”

“A conventional war. The Kingdom of Merica is going to attack.”

“This is a joke, right? Why would Merica have a leeway to do such a thing?”

Even now Lancelot and Erwin were not aware that only their kingdom was being attacked by demons.

“I do not know. But they will come, soon.”

And Maria was equally oblivious. She had no way of knowing the situation of a country that wasn’t even playable in the game.

“...How serious will the situation be?”

“The capital will fall. There will be a considerable amount of casualties.”

“The capital?”

The fall of the capital would put the existence of the Kingdom itself at risk. Not a prospect Lancelot could take in calmly.

“How do we prevent that!?”

“It cannot be done, the city will fall. However, there is a method to win the war in spite

of that.”

“...Cannot be done? That is the capital. The capital!”

Both Erwin and Lancelot reacted the same way. Their mothers were in the capital right now, they couldn't allow a hostile assault unchallenged.

“We will just take it back. I know how to do it.”

“Are you really trying to tell me that it has to fall!?”

“Yes. And what of it?”

“That... Just what are you thinking?”

“Just have the people important to you escape in time. And make sure that the hindrances stay in there till the end.”

“Are you kidding...”

It was unclear who did Maria consider to be a hindrance, but neither of the youths had it in him to ask. They feared that the gravity of that knowledge would not allow them to remain silent.

“This is the moment to be thinking about our futures beyond the battle with the devils. And the future of this kingdom too.”

Maria was saying this because she realized that her marriage to Arnold was now next to impossible. After all, if things were going to plan, she would be informally acknowledged as his fiancée already. The next fastest ticket to the throne was to allow the current Queen die with the fall of the capital and immediately become a new one.

Given the reality of the situation, that far from her being acknowledged as a marriage prospect she was forced to watch her distance to Arnold grow instead, Maria could already see her ending. This position was beyond recovery, the best she could hope for was ending up as the wife of Lancelot.

And she was not satisfied with that.

For her, an otherworlder destined to obtain the highest position available for a

woman, to fall so low as becoming a mere wife of a Marquess... It would be nice to be able to restart the game, but Maria wasn't so naive to expect that to be possible.

That was why she started to think what to do instead. After all, if realizing her desires within the game was no longer possible, she would simply make them the reality once it had ended. She would be a queen, one way or another.

Which led to the "hindrances" she had mentioned previously. Not only the royal couple, but the whole royal family. Erwin and Lancelot chose wisely by not broaching the subject. They were not mentally ready to consider betraying the whole royal clan, all they wanted at this point was to inherit their Houses.

"...You are not going to try something stupid, are you?"

"Something stupid? Why would I? I just want to make the best use of my otherworldly knowledge."

"That much is fine, but..."

"That knowledge is where my true worth lies. It would even allow creation of weapons stronger than magic."

"...Stronger than magic?"

"Strong enough to overturn the world, to make it a place where bloodlines no longer matter."

"...Maria?"

Maria's thoughts were far too dangerous, even for Erwin and Lancelot. So dangerous, in fact, to make them wonder if she wasn't the real hindrance here.

"A power that would make world domination trivial."

"...Maria, do you truly wish to go so far?"

"Me? Not at all. All I wish is to be happily married to the person I love and spend the remainder of my days in luxury."

She was very deliberate with her words. The emphasis on lack of interest in authority,

but a desire for a life of opulence. Like a queen, for example. At the side of someone who would become a king thanks to obtaining her knowledge. And, obviously, there were only two viable candidates right now.

“This is a discussion for after the devil subjugation, no?”

Erwin reacted first, though not in a receptive manner. Fearing that Lancelot might start seeing him as a threat, he suggested shelving the subject for later.

“...That it is. Removing the devil threat comes first. But a war before that, eh?”

“It will happen roughly at the same time as the next subjugation. We will be dispatched to deal with the demons again and Merica will use that opening to attack.”

“We, eh?... Figures.”

Lancelot briefly pondered disposing of the Crown Prince, but instantly abandoned that thought. Not because of his feelings towards Arnold, he simply needed the royal's power for the upcoming war. It would demand a symbol, a role Lancelot was not illustrious enough to fill.

“All things considered, Viscount's Frey strength will be required to defend the capital, no?”

In the meantime, Erwin thought this was the right moment to get rid of Rion. And he dressed that idea in a rather sarcastic question.

“Oh, you're right. Rion's presence is absolutely necessary.”

In the end, Rion's existence was the thing Maria currently feared the most as she had no clue how to deal with the man.

And thus, Rion was yet again about to be dragged onto the scene by a plot. A plot instigated by none other than the Protagonist. The Protagonist that was utterly vile, instead of virtuous. Which only showed how much the story had deviated from its original track.

A fact that both Maria and Rion were still oblivious to.

# Chapter 64

## Something has changed

Instead of heading off to another devil subjugation, Arnold and the others headed back to the capital. There would be no triumphal parades this time, the orders were to return as fast as they could.

Once in the city, they could spot no signs of celebration. The place was tense and the atmosphere was exacerbated by the sight of the soldiers and knights of the garrison frantically coming in and out of the citadel.

The citizens of the capital could instinctively feel that a new battle was approaching.

Arnold's group felt that way too once they crossed the city gates. Something was going on and they didn't understand what. With that on their mind, they hurried to the castle with an even greater sense of urgency than that of a common citizen.

There was no praise or formal reception awaiting them there either, they were curtly informed of the King's whereabouts and told to go there without delay. Arnold felt nervous opening the door to that chamber. What he saw in there stupefied him.

The middle of the room was occupied by a huge table and that table was groaning under the weight of a multitude of maps, papers, and other documents spread on top of it. It was not the only place with a map on it either. There was also a large map on a wall and that one was scribbled all over with words and symbols.

The King stood in front of that one, his face a mix of emotion. He was accompanied by the Knight Commander, the Marshal of the Crown and a posse of subordinates of those two.

But the most surprising sight of them all was that of Rion, dozing off on a chair next to all those leaders and military officials.

Neither Arnold nor the others had the tiniest shred of an idea as to what was happening.

“You all are being a hindrance.”

A voice suddenly resounded behind his back. It was familiar and, sure enough, when Arnold looked behind him he saw Ariel there holding a tray.

“...Ariel?”

This just made the confusion in the prince’s head grow.

“Could highness please make way?”

“Ah, certainly.”

Once Arnold and the others backed off, Ariel went inside the room straight to where Rion was. She placed the tray on the table, grinned, and pinched her husband’s nose.

“...Nn? Nggg?”

Rion woke up immediately, his eyes met Ariel’s.

“Ah, I forgot the mouth, shame.”

Ariel was clearly and visibly enjoying herself.

“...That would suffocate me, you know.”

“Good morning to you too, Rion. I prepared tea.”

She brushed off his complaints and presented the tray with the beverage.

“Thank you. But good morning? Have I slept that much?”

“No husband, it was not even half an hour.”

“...Ah, good night to you then.”

Rion immediately rested his head against the chair again.

“Nonono, do not think you will be allowed to sleep.”

“Why?”

“His highness the Crown Prince and the others have returned.”

“...Oh, I see.”

Seeing Arnold and the others, still hovering at the threshold, Rion corrected his posture. But instead of going to greet them, he just sipped on the tea that Ariel had prepared.

“Oh, have you returned? Do not just stand there. Enter.”

The King was the one to welcome them instead and they did just as they were told. Arnold himself went to the central table and sat close to Rion.

“...Would there be any tea for us?”

“Shouldn’t majesty ask a maid for that? Ariel is not one, she is my wife.”

“You are not wrong but... Ah, never mind.”

The King was just barely able to hold himself from saying that he would very much like the tea prepared by the wife of his son. He rubbed the corners of his eyes with his fingers, looking troubled. After all, even he was tired at this point.

“It is fine, I will prepare tea for everyone. However, that is a hard task for one person, may I borrow the castle’s maids for a while?”

“Oh, can I leave that to you?”

Hearing the proposal of Ariel, the monarch smiled again and kept smiling while Ariel left the room again.

“Heavens blessed you with a considerate wife”

“None of the stories I know in which a king lays a hand on his vassal’s wife ends well, majesty.”

Not knowing the truth of their relationship, this was the only way Rion could react to the King’s praise. Incidentally, he was probably the only person in the world to

naturally jump to that kind of a conclusion.

“You really...”

“Shouldn’t majesty talk to your son first?”

“...I guess we should.”

For the first time since their arrival, the King’s attention went fully to the Crown Prince’s group.

“Let us start by congratulating you all on the good work on your mission.”

“Thank you very much, majesty.”

“And with that out of the way... Which questions shall we start with?”

The King looked at Rion while asking this. Arnold and his group immediately realized that Viscount Frey had a central role in whatever was happening.

“...Confirm the truth, majesty.”

“That is a lot of hassle, how about you do that instead?”

“Haa...”

With a loud, dramatic sigh Rion faced the arrivals. His eyes rested on Maria who was sitting in the farthest seat.

“Miss Theodore, a question.”

“Ah, yes?”

“I need you to tell me something. This is something that only you would know.”

“What would that be?”

“When is the Kingdom of Merica going to attack?”

“...Eh?”

Hearing the unexpected question, Maria's eyes opened wide from surprise. It was exactly the reaction that Rion had wished for.

"As I thought, you were aware of it. As expected of the hero, I guess. So... When?"

Rion resumed the conversation on the premise that Maria was fully aware of the incoming attack.

"...How did you know?"

This too was a reaction Rion had wanted. Now that she asked this question, feigning ignorance was no longer an option for her. Attempting to get her by surprise brought satisfying results.

"Not only the border with Merica, but the whole south is a mess when it comes to defenses. The capital is thinly protected. Isn't expecting other countries to try and exploit that obvious?"

"But..."

The capital was certain to fall to the Merica's surprise attack in the game's story. But now that the Kingdom was aware of that, Maria didn't know how the future could possibly still bring the same result.

"Thanks to the hero's knowledge, our worries were confirmed. This calls for counter-measures. The obvious question is, what should we do?"

"Eh?"

"Aren't you supposed to save the Kingdom from peril?"

"....."

The protagonist's task in the game was to save the citizens after the Kingdom's fall. Therefore, Maria had no answer for Rion's question.

"...Oh? Don't tell me...?"

Maria's response betrayed that the prospect of the city's fall was not a joke. And that Maria's intentions weren't good. Staying silent despite having this kind of knowledge

was grounds for punishment.

“T-That’s something I want counsel on myself!”

Knowing well that letting things develop that way would be bad for her, Maria immediately started to improvise excuses.

“Counsel?”

“...The attack will come while we are out subjugating a new devil. It will not be possible to vanquish it and defend the capital at the same time. I was at a loss on what should we do.”

For the time being, she had settled on making it seem that she was just late in relaying the news.

However, to Rion, that was irrelevant. He didn’t think it was possible for the protagonist to face any punishment at this stage of the scenario.

“Is that so... Should I replace you in devil subjugation then?”

“Eh?”

“That would be easier for m– I mean, the citizens would feel more at ease with the hero protecting them.”

“...The next devil to appear is a really dangerous one.”

Allowing subjugations to be treated as the less serious danger would lead to Maria’s worth to the Kingdom dropping. She could not allow Rion’s words to go unchallenged

“I understand that. I also expect that to be true, but still, fighting humans is harder...”

“Why do you think so?”

“Because when you fight the demons, all methods are on the table. You can burn an entire settlement with demons in it and no one will say a word if there are no human casualties. Try to do that to a human army and everyone screams of massacres.”

“.....”

Rion's example was outrageous and Maria again had no reply. For the first time since she had met him, he made her afraid.

"Besides, when it comes to the devils, you're here to ask for advice. And that's enough for even someone like me to succeed."

"You cannot possibly..."

She desperately grasped for an argument to refute him and found nothing. Even accusing him of lacking magic with the correct attributes wouldn't fly. Rion had the same water attribute that she had. All that was left available to her was her trump card, the fusion, but she was hesitating to mention it. After all, it was very likely he would prove capable of using it once taught.

If that happened, her own worth would diminish. She needed popularity among the citizens even more, now that she was aiming to become a queen outside of the paths offered by the game plot.

Her pride didn't allow her to accept being written in the history in a bad light as a usurper.

"We apologize for having to cut this fascinating conversation short, but we really need Viscount Frey to return to planning the capital's defensive measures."

Maria got help from an unexpected source.

"...Everything is ready, majesty. My wish to have the hero here is a contingency measure."

This was why Rion had been dozing in the chair like he had.

The King, when made aware of the possibility of an assault from Merica, had immediately summoned Rion to the capital. Not to learn more, but to have him prepare countermeasures.

This was why the table had all those documents on it. They were intelligence collated by the south-eastern department of the Kingdom. Information that Rion crammed into his head and used to formulate a defensive strategy.

And since it hadn't been known when exactly Merica was going to attack, Rion had

been working under pressure and he hardly had time to sleep.

“Put the defensive lines back in order and make that fact obvious to Merica”. This is your strategy?”

And this ultimately was what Rion came up with. A plan that King wouldn't put up with.

“It is a splendid plan, majesty. Once Merica realizes our country doesn't have any openings, they won't come to invade. The war will be avoided.”

“For the time being, you meant to say. This will do nothing to temper their ambitions.”

“It will remain that way as long as the country continues to be vigilant.”

“And we are telling you that ambition needs to be crushed once and for all.”

“I don't think that is a good reason to take unnecessary risks for, majesty. “

“We command it to happen!”

“It is a subject's duty to refuse an order that is misguided.”

This kind of exchange had happened many times, even way before the Crown Prince came back. The King wanted to make use of the Merica's invasion to crush them. After all, invading another country brought a lot of risks. The damage one would suffer would be huge if one ended up losing after going in deep into hostile territory.

The King wanted Merica to suffer that exact fate. And he wanted to do it because he believed Rion was capable of pulling it off.

But Rion was not even trying to raise to those expectations. In the first place, he didn't even want to be in the capital. The development of his territory was progressing well and he didn't want to be separated from it. Rion started to feel that if it manages to do just one more step forward, the rest will go smoothly.

Hence, the King's request was a hindrance. Enough of a one, in fact, that he was tempted to switch sides.

“The tea is ready. May I suggest a break?”

The voice of Ariel instantly dispersed the stormy atmosphere around Rion and the King, although her husband's mood didn't really improve.

"Mhm. A splendid idea."

"In that case, ladies, do serve the beverages."

"Yes ma'am!"

Following Ariel's instructions, the maids placed the tea they had brought by each of the chairs. There were even snacks to be had with it.

Before long, the fragrance of the tea enveloped the entire room calming those inside it. The mood changed for now.

"...You really have an excellent wife."

"And I won't hand Ariel over to anyone, majesty."

"Oh, we know. All we are trying to say is that the two of you are good for each other."

"...I guess"



For Maria, this development was really unexpected. Her great plan to use the fall of the capital to get rid of all the hindrances was hindered by the worst of them. Rion.

It should be a good thing that he had come to the palace on his own without her having to do anything, yet it only ended up causing her more worry.

With the invasion countermeasures this advanced, she did not think fall of capital was possible now

And, with the capital safe, her most recent scheme crumbled to dust. What was more, she couldn't even be sure what was going to happen in the story from now on.

No matter how much she tried to deny them, her worries kept increasing. She had finally realized that her usual method of just going along with expected scenario events wouldn't work anymore. She had to act based on her own ideas from now on.

And she would start by getting rid of Rion.

“He is a dangerous existence.”

This was the first thing she said to Lancelot now that they were left alone together.

He and Erwin were the only people left truly at her disposal. The connections she had established in the Academy frayed or snapped completely now that those young men were leading armies all over the Kingdom. It didn't help that she had neglected them thinking she no longer had a use for them once she had been recognized as the hero. It didn't help either that she had already thought of herself as queen and though dealing with those of low station a hassle.

Now that things were not going her way and her relationship with Arnold was history, she regretted that state of things. But she had to make do with what she had and figure out a different method.

“I do not disagree. But he is strong, shouldn't we make use of that for now.?”

Lancelot's reply was not what she wanted to hear.

There was a fundamental difference in how the two of them viewed Rion, and it came from their personal standpoints. Lancelot, a member of one of the Kingdom's most influential Houses, was still loyal to the country. For him, if Rion had the power to save the land from ruin, he had to be used.

Maria saw things differently. While she did want to become a queen, it did not matter to her if it would be a Gran Flamm's throne or not. Therefore, any hindrances on the road to that goal should be destroyed.

The biggest of those at the moment was Rion. She couldn't know he saw her in a very similar light.

“We can't do that.”

“Why? As you said yourself, we cannot subjugate devils and defend the capital at the same time. We need someone to fulfill one of those tasks in our stead.”

“That will change the future. It may end up leading to the Demon God resurrecting, you know?”

“Leading to what?”

This was the argument Maria chose to convince Lancelot. She wasn't even lying, the scenario she had known from the game was indeed falling apart.

“All the methods to deal with the devil I have in my head... If things go as they are supposed to, that knowledge is certain to bring success. However, he is always acting differently to what I have in mind. If that continues, the future will change, my knowledge will turn useless, and the subjugations will fail. The Demon God will revive.”

“...Are you certain of that? That man had already subjugated two devils without your knowledge. If he can do it, so can we. “

Lancelot was secretly not happy with what Maria had said. It implied that it ultimately didn't matter who was at her side and it wounded his pride.

“I would hardly call his actions a success. They ended up making the enemy stronger.”

“Really?”

“Really. In all honesty, what he did made me doubt him. I can't help thinking he's actually acting in the interest of the Demon God's return.”

“What!?”

And, like that, Maria attempted to mislead Lancelot into thinking that Rion himself might be a devil. The noble found this “truth” shocking, but he couldn't object. He was still under the impression that all that Maria said on the subject of the devils was correct.

“I have no evidence. But if my suspicions are true, the implications are grave.”

“...But without evidence.”

Although he was shocked, Lancelot's response lacked enthusiasm. Rion of now was different to what he had been in the past. He had the trust of the King as proven by being tasked with the defense of the capital. Attempting a false indictment on such an individual carried a huge risk of having it rebound on them instead.

“Think about it, isn’t it weird for someone from the slum to find employment in a marquess estate?”

“It is, but it is also not enough.”

The fact was suspicious, but carried no connection to the devils.

“And the fact he can use magic despite having heterochromia... Isn’t he simply channeling the power of the Demon God?”

“There is no evidence to support that.”

The existence of the Demon God itself was still unconfirmed. Although the Magic Bureau would be more than delighted to examine Rion’s powers in detail, this was not enough to tie him to the devils.

“...Do you not trust my words?”

Hearing Lancelot continuously reject her words flustered Maria, but not for a moment did she consider her arguments lacked persuasion.

“I do. But without evidence, nobody else will. We need more to indict him.”

“He’s a devil. There’s no need for indictments, just subjugation. Once that is done, the truth will become evident.”

Her reasoning was similar to those fuelling witch hunts. The righteous tested the suspects with torture and those who survived were guilty, while those who died joined gods in paradise. Regretfully, innocence could only be established posthumously. A very handy excuse to remove someone that needs to die.

“But...”

“Lancelot. I want to protect the future with you. With two of us together, I’m sure we can make this world into a better one.”

“Maria...”

In the end, Maria reverted to seduction. And it wasn’t a bad method to fall back on. The greatest weapon of the protagonist had been, and still was, her ability to capture

men. It wasn't as if her charm went poof when the game reached the Strategy Arc

She was going to use her ability for the sake of the future she thought of. Not to capture a target, but for the sake of her scheme.

It made one wonder what kind of story such a protagonist would bring about.

# Chapter 65

## Even mediocre kings have ambitions

In the end, Rion succumbed to the King's pressure and begun working on a plan to cause Merica the greatest possible damage. Not only was he told that the task would be given to others if he continued to refuse, but, and that was possibly the biggest threat, he himself would be sent to the front lines too.

While Rion didn't lack the confidence to fight, he didn't want to be caught up in a half-baked strategy of someone stupid enough to confidently declare he can do what the King wants.

From there on, things progressed fast. After all, Rion had, in the past, been considering exactly the strategy that the monarch desired and only rejected it in favor of a simpler, purely defensive, plan once he concluded it was overly difficult to pull off.

Rion dusted off and presented those old designs, outlined the risks they carried and the resources they required. The King accepted without objections and, like so, the first stage of preparing the strategy was concluded.

Which meant Rion had nothing to do at the moment. The Crown was busy assembling what he had said was required and the invasion was not expected to happen just yet giving more than enough time to prepare.

His current greatest problem was the fact that he was going to be involved in the practical application of the plan, and was given the commanding position on top of that.

Of course, opposition to that state of things was great. However, no one wanted to lead the defense by himself in his stead. The situation turned out exactly as Sol had described it before – nobody but Rion could possibly execute the strategies Rion came up with.

Therefore, everyone protesting his appointment advocated a change of strategy too. But, to Rion's great disappointment, no credible alternative plan surfaced yet.

“Well then, let’s start.”

“Whenever you’re ready, lord.”

“...Here I go!”

While all that politics was rumbling in the background, Rion was using the free time to train himself by having mock duels against Kiel. Something that was only possible in the capital those days.

He opened the duel by immediately lunging at the opponent. The older man attempted to avoid through footwork, but Rion had no intention of letting the clan head slip away and matched his moves.

Rion’s blade arced high, but the blow was blocked.

“...Impressive.”

Even so, Kiel was terribly surprised. Even considering they hadn’t sparred for a long time, Rion showed remarkable improvement. In the past, when serious, Kiel would be able to avoid every attack without having to use his blade.

“I improved a little, didn’t I?”

“How did you achieve so much?”

“I studied the footwork thoroughly. That is where all the secrets of the clan styles lie. I tried to find the common points and discard everything else with the assumption that will let me gain all the merits in one, new, style...”

“You really are...”

“Too early to be surprised. The real thing starts here.”

“Oh? I shall accompany you with my full skill in that case.”

“Here I go!”

And again, Rion closed the distance between them. The movement was neither very fast, nor very unique, but it surprised Kiel. It was both sudden and very natural,

though, and, for the master of the Blau style sword, it was plainly an amazing feat.

What Rion did by eliminating all the inefficiency from his approach was, in essence, a secret technique of his clan's school. A thing only a very select few managed to achieve in their lifetime.

And he was on the verge of reaching those heights by self-study, a truly outrageous talent.

But even so, Kiel still had no intentions of losing. The clan head had trained for much longer to reach this point, he still had the advantage in experience.

The fight went on for quite a while, but, eventually, Rion could keep up no more and his stance crumbled. Kiel was not a fighter to let such an opening go and smashed the flat of his blade into the defenseless youth's side.

"Guaah!"

The pain was too much for Rion to bear and he fell onto his knees.

"Not today. I cannot afford to lose yet."

"...Hurts. Ah, it's been so long since I've felt this."

Despite losing, Rion smiled. It wasn't that the defeat didn't frustrate him, the happiness that Kiel still remained a wall to overcome was simply stronger.

"Hearing you say this, have you been winning against Mercury?"

"I haven't reached that stage yet, but neither can he make me show this kind of an opening."

"Is that so? I guess I must have him work harder. After all, he is the next head of Clan Blue."

"He is working hard as is. His pursuits simply take him in a different direction."

"Different direction?"

"By now, he is probably better than you in small-scale cavalry tactics. If he manages to

increase the numbers he can effectively command, I believe he'll become an excellent leader. He had already shown himself to be superior to a royal guard of your generation."

Since his win against Sol, Mercury had been more inclined to commanding cavalry and had set his mind on mastering that. He had been that happy to be praised by Rion back then.

"...Interesting. So he took the path of a commander rather than that of a soldier."

"That would be assuming too much for now. I think it's safer to say he's trying to learn many different things and leading cavalry is just what absorbs him the most for now."

"Even if that's true, he should just pursue what fascinates him."

"I don't disagree. Just bear in mind that is only possible because he has enough time to pursue his interests."

"That..."

Kiel understood the meaning behind Rion's words instantly. It made the old man unbearably happy and pained at the same time that he was so well understood by his lord despite such a long separation.

"Bandeaux still needs your generation. And it will need it even more from now on."

"...We are not capable of governing."

"That doesn't stop you from offering support. For now, there's a certain momentum in a favorable direction, but that won't last. Contrary to what you may expect, if the restoration of the territory succeeds and things get better, various new kinds of discontent will emerge. The young ones will not be able to handle that."

The problems of the citizens of Bandeaux in the past had been prosaic – no money, no jobs, nothing to eat. But now that there was work, the people had an income and didn't go around hungry, it would be wrong to think that the dissatisfaction would disappear. Humans were inherently greedy, once they achieved something, they would seek more. Their desires would just become more diverse. With that in mind, Rion was certain it was impossible to resolve the discontent with providing simple necessities.

“I believe it will be fine as long as you’re with them, lord.”

Kiel was aware of that Rion’s strength was making others follow.

“...If that’s what you think, then not doing anything is fine too. There’s no need for you to be of any use so do not die. Return to Bandeaux alive. That’s my wish.”

“Milord...”

Rion, having realized it would be impossible to convince them with logic, straightforwardly expressed his feelings instead. This was the first time for Kiel.

“Do not think I separate people according to whether I can use them or not. I dislike everyone equally by nature. Not by choice, mind you, I was just raised that way.”

While Rion was speaking with clear embarrassment in his voice, Kiel’s feelings gushed forth confronted with the youth’s sweet side not many got to witness.

“...Yes. I am aware that... That Lord Rion... Loves people themselves.”

Someone who tried to trust people even though he hated them. Someone who wanted to trust people, feared being betrayed, but not wanting to hate them even more decided to avoid them as much as possible.

This was Kiel’s description of Rion after many deliberations.

“...Didn’t I say I hate people? Anyhow, dying in vain won’t be forgiven. Tell that to the others too.”

“Yes, lord. You can rest assured.”



Maria was not the only one scheming on the sidelines. The King himself was hatching a plot and while his objectives were different than hers, he couldn’t really hide his designs as well.

Just the idea of leaving the whole battle against Gran Flamm’s rival in the domination over the continent, Merica, to Rion was so unprecedented that it naturally made one think that he was plotting something. In fact, many people had already moved to

investigate just what did the king see in Viscount Frey.

All of those probes were hindered by the thick barrier of the slums and failed. Which was a blessing in disguise to the kingdom.

However, it didn't make the current situation favorable either. Many a person jokingly said that Rion may actually be an illegitimate child of the monarch, unaware of just how close to the truth that was.

This situation caused the Knight Commander a lot of anxiety and since Frederick was the only person capable of admonishing the King in matters regarding Rion...

"What are you trying to do?"

"...I want to damage Merica more than they have ever been before."

The King understood what was being asked, but purposefully avoided the real subject. Making it all the more obvious he was hiding something.

"Do not play the fool, please. You are fully aware I ask of Viscount Frey."

"And I am giving you an answer. The one who made the strategy will be the one to execute it. That is the most sound thing to do, is it not?"

"He cannot possibly be given command over ten thousands of troops at his current rank."

Rion was not only just a Viscount, he wasn't even a part of the military. Nominally, he lacked the right to command even a single recruit.

"There will be a different titular commander, Rion will have control as a strategy staff officer."

Frederick couldn't fathom the reasons behind the King's insistence on making Rion take command. Having him stand out more than he was at the moment would not be good.

"You may not know, but there are odd rumors making rounds in the castle for a while now."

“Rumors?”

“They say that Viscount Frey may, in fact, be an illegitimate child of the king.”

“.....”

The king was rendered speechless. It also made it clear that he did not suddenly start seeing Rion as part of the royal family. Frederick was greatly relieved.

But he still had to understand his liege’s motivation for the conversation to proceed.

“At present it is a humorous anecdote without any basis in facts. “

“...Oh. Do not scare me like that, please.”

Predictably, Frederick was able to dispel the King’s worry in an instant. But the ease with which he achieved it angered the old knight.

“This is no reason to relax. The very fact of this being considered a valid joke is a problem.”

“I know that much.”

“No, you probably do not. You have not given any thought to why this is amusing to so many and who is being actually ridiculed, have you?”

“Ridiculed? How does it ridicule anyone?”

“Of course it does. An excelling illegitimate child of the king by necessity has to be compared to someone. Who do you think that would be?”

That was painfully obvious. The king had only one other son.

“...Arnold?”

“Arnold.”

The Crown Prince was no longer being described as wise. The king was not aware of the change of sentiment those days. That was unavoidable, no one would purposely criticize Arnold in front of his father and all he ever heard about the Crown Prince

were the words of praise.

The only person that would dare to do otherwise, Frederick, even now, thought that the prince was an excellent young man and would not tolerate him being badmouthed.

But in time, the new general sentiment around Arnold reached Frederick's ears too.

"Why would Arnold be ridiculed?"

The King could not think of any reason for his son's prestige to fall that low.

"Because of Viscount Frey. You could say Arnold is reaping what he has sown."

"...The case of Vincent Woodville, I guess?"

"Yes. It seems that there is a new ballad popular among the minstrels as of late. The story of a marquess house' child and his loyal retainer, one of love between that retainer and his wife to be despite the gulf of social standing between them. Remarkably popular, really. That story has a villainous young prince too. All fictional characters, of course, but not very hard to draw connections to actual living individuals. Which most people do."

"Such a thing is happening?"

"It cannot be just shrugged off as a trivial problem. The thing has spread far and wide among the people, and, by that, I do not mean just the capital alone."

No minstrel ever stopped just at one town. They tended to travel from one place to another to let as many people hear their craft as was possible. A song that became popular in the capital, would naturally be requested more in the provinces. And that was how the story of Vincent and Rion had spread throughout the kingdom.

"That... Is very bad."

"By the way, the song seems to evolve in time. The most recent additions describe how the royal retainer became a hero to restore his lost lord's honor."

"...Say again?"

Predictably, even the king would notice the oddity. While it was true that the story of

Rion's life would make a good story material, it was not natural for it to be followed this closely and spread so far, so quickly. Especially when the Crown was actively suppressing the information about the fate of Vincent.

"Right now, this is just my suspicion, but I believe this is spread on purpose. And the culprit is most likely..."

"Rion. The most obvious suspect. So he actually has that kind of capability, eh?"

"It does seem that the strength of our Viscount is not limited to the resources of his fief. But its precise extent is uncertain. He is certainly strong enough to prevent others from investigating him closer..."

So far, Rion's connection to the underworld was hidden from prying eyes. He had met with Folz and numerous other shady people, but that was mostly in Camargue, the other parties were under the guise of merchants, and they were actually behaving like merchants would. Some people did think that certain business partners of Rion were somewhat shady, but nobody had a clue that they were his actual subordinates in a crime syndicate.

Cassius would be the person that knew the most about those links, but he seemed so distant to Rion, both physically and emotionally, that no investigator paid attention to him.

However, an overly strong information security suggested something of importance was being hidden. Frederick understood that much without much difficulty.

"...I agree that has to be stopped. But it and the current affairs are two different things."

"If the fame of the Rion increases more, the Crown Prince's reputation will fall further."

"Which is why I said that has to be stopped. And, long-term, this will cease to be a problem when the relations between the two brothers are mended. Was that not your wish, Frederick?"

The King knew that fixing the relationship between his two sons was not going well. But he said that anyway because, presently, having Rion in command was more important for him than the prestige of his heir.

"...Why do you insist on having Viscount Frey take command so much?"

Coming to the conclusion that he would get nowhere with further probing, the Knight Commander decided to ask straight up instead.

“Because he offers the best prospect of victory.”

“Did he not say it himself that we can avoid battle by making it obvious there are no openings to exploit? I agree with that opinion.”

“Avoiding battle will do nothing to change Merica’s power. But if we manage to beat them completely...”

The Knight Commander was finally able to understand what drove his monarch. And why he insisted on Rion this much.

“You desire hegemony?”

“...Is that wrong, Frederick? I am still in the prime of my life.”

Flames of ambition suddenly flared in the King’s heart. The ambition to bring the entire continent under Gran Flamm’s dominion. It was a wish of his predecessors from long past too, a wish he saw a chance making real during his own reign.

This wouldn’t be worthy of condemnation if he had this desire for a while now and worked towards that goal in the past. But Frederick was aware that was not the case.

His majesty knew his own limitations in the past and his only real cherished desire was to bequeath the realm to Arnold who would be able to take it to the heights beyond his father’s skill.

But after coming this far in this pursuit it was all changed by Rion’s existence.

“Do you think... Can you...”

Frederick couldn’t finish his question. He was going to ask whether the King had the capability to make Rion obey, but this was not a question for a subordinate to ask.

“That man IS my son.”

But the King was able to comprehend the unsaid doubt. And that was his answer.

"A fact you cannot tell him. Would he really work hard for the sake of the kingdom?"

"He has brought results thus far."

"Results for the sake of the restoration of his lord's honor. A goal he even now is working to achieve."

"...If he will not labor for the Kingdom, he will just be told the truth."

"And if that sows the seed of desire in his heart? I have just told you how the popular opinion sees those two."

"That's..."

"I understand your feelings, I really do. But please, please consider the future harmony of this land."

Frederick had his head bowed deeply as he said this. His frank advice to the King would be to forget his newfound ambitions, do nothing, and leave matters for the next generation to resolve. But he was aware that would be really harsh.

"...Am I that bad of a king?"

"Looking at the dynasty as a whole, you can be considered wise."

"Is that so..."

The hero called Rion was born and this was certain to bring turmoil to future generations. Even a mediocre king would know that much.



It would take four months before the force to intercept the invasion of Merica departed. There was no formality, or pomp, to their departure. Nor was there any ceremony to appoint a commander. The troops split into numerous small groups and headed out of the capital trying to avoid attracting attention.

That was not the whole army either. Multiple detachments had been deployed before that under the pretext of demon subjugation. All of them bound to perform their own task at a designated day.

They were all ordered to assume a predetermined position until the day of the decisive battle.

A fuse of the war between the Kingdom of Merica and the Gran Flamm Kingdom, a background event merely narrated in the game, was lit.

Its explosion would make Rion's name resound through the whole continent.

# Chapter 66

## Side Event:

### Operation to intercept the Kingdom of Merica

In the end, Rion's role in the upcoming campaign against Merica was defined as something called Head of Intelligence Control. He was to advise the actual commander in charge what his troops should do based on the information flowing back from the ground zero.

That meant he did not have the official right to make decisions, but was still, in the end, being made to do the same thing. The command over troops was taken from him in favor of an incomprehensible position due to a compromise between the King and other officials, who did not want to not make his war services more pronounced.

There were no objections to using his strength as long as he would gain no more merit in the process. In the end, Rion ended up being the only one dissatisfied by the course of events.

He was currently in an unnamed village in the southern region of the kingdom. One of those that were forcibly evacuated to minimize the number of casualties from the demon attacks.

Only a handful of top officials knew that this place had been chosen for the headquarters and a focal point of the upcoming operation.

"Reporting! Merica's troops spotted roughly five kilometers to the west! Estimated two hundred."

The whole building tensed at the messenger's report. Five kilometers was so close it was almost visible with the naked eye.

"Where are they headed!?"

The question was asked by a member of the Intelligence Bureau. The full cooperation of the whole bureau had been Rion's first demand for the upcoming battle. Agreeing

to that, the King seconded its head, a man named James, to Viscount Frey.

“Due north, sir!”

“Any signs of them sending out scouts?”

“Scouts spotted, sir. But they stay narrow and move only in the direction of their advance.”

“I see... Alright, good work.”

Getting confirmation that the chances of this place being discovered were low, the tension evaporated from those present. In the meantime, Rion kept looking at the map, not looking nervous even for a moment.

“As you just heard, sir, we are saved by the enemies’ negligence.”

Having finished interrogating the messenger, James addressed the completely focused Rion.

“It’s the opposite, actually.”

Rion answered, never looking away from the map. James flashed a hint of irritation both at this behavior and the denial.

“...Why opposite, sir?”

“The enemy didn’t spread their scouts wide out of the fear of being discovered by us. They’re not being negligent, but cautious. They are scouting the population centers ahead of them without sending more people than absolutely necessary.”

“How can you be sure, sir?”

“All the enemy forces we have discovered up to now are weaving between the locations of villages and towns... Incidentally, would you please mark the position of this enemy already? I’m getting quite tired of staring at the point they were located at.”

“...Do it.”

One of the subordinates moved to mark the map, per James’ instruction.

“A little bit to the left... Too far now. That’s right, there.”

Following Rion’s very detailed guidance, a certain part of the map was marked and annotated with the number of enemy troops. There were many more similar notes on the map already.

“Can I have the map of the surrounding area, please.”

There was more than one map in the headquarters, of course. There were also others, some showing the entirety of the southern region and some detailed enough to show only the circumference of the village they were in right now. All of them bore similar marks.

“Now then, the number of enemy troops that have crossed the early warning line number a hundred. Adding all the identified hostile groups, we’re looking at around a twenty-five thousand strong army.”

“...I don’t believe we have really discovered all of them, sir.”

Although they put in much effort into practicing setting up a warning line like this, it couldn’t really be called perfect. The Information Bureau might have deployed a considerable number of its men in this strategy, but the border with Merica was still too vast for them to cover fully.

“That’s true. There should be at least thirty thousand on the lower and forty on the higher end of the estimation range, I guess?”

“Forty thousand... Isn’t that a bit too low, sir?”

“Their numbers by necessity have to be limited as to not alarm the surrounding towns and villages. With this in mind, Merica had to decide on a few invasion routes and sent between two to three hundred units along them. This much should be clear, no?”

“I believe anyone would see that by looking at the map, sir.”

The lines and numbers on the overall map merged together in numerous locations. It was clear that numerous separate units were following the same invasion routes.

“Looking for similarities in the invasion routes as marked on the map suggests there are at most two main paths.”

“...That being the case they are bound to send more troops along the same route. I guess we will be staying in this place for some time, sir.”

There was a reason why Rion's group was based in this place. It was roughly equally distant from the majority of the numerous scout units deployed on the warning line. But, as a consequence, it was right under the nose of the enemy.

“I wonder about that?”

“Forty thousand doesn't seem to be enough to capture the capital, sir.”

“Depending on the method, the capital can be taken even with thirty thousand.”

“Thirty thousand?”

“The problems with defending the city are not limited just to the shortage of men on the walls. Many people were evacuated inside from the outlying areas, do you really think all of them are harmless refugees?”

“...Are you suggesting enemy spies had gotten inside the walls?”

Counterintelligence and enemy agent interception was one of the bureau's main tasks. Rion's words implied that job was not done properly and seemed to criticize his organization.

“I'm raising possibilities. If I was to conquer the capital I would've attempted that myself and a success would lower the number of soldiers required to thirty thousand.”

“We have not permitted any spies to get inside.”

“Oh? Is that so? That's a relief then.”

Rion's words spoke of reassurance, but the way he said it dripped with sarcasm.

“...I guess we are not being trusted?”

“Oh, I do trust you. However, our agents managed to get inside the capital of the Merica Kingdom, right?”

“That is...”

Of course, the spies had been dispatched, but James felt professional reluctance to confirm it aloud.

“You see, I myself wouldn’t have the confidence to state with certainty I’m capable of something my enemy cannot replicate. Besides, I’m quite the worrywart, so even when others assure me everything is fine I can’t stop myself from considering potential problems.”

“...”

James had no retort. The standard assumption of bureau’s operations was that it would know that the capital was compromised.

“Well, in the end, numbers do not really matter. Even if not all of them are here yet, we have to make a move now.”

“...May I ask for the reason, sir?”

“I have a complete understanding of their movements now. They are going to secure a number of vertical invasion routes and pour troops into them aiming to gradually gather together along the way. I expect at least five thousand troops per route. With that all, trying to crush them one after another should still take a considerable time.”

“...Time during which we would be discovered by the enemy, huh?”

The main point of Rion’s strategy was to crush the dispersed invasive forces one after another. And, of course, other enemy forces had to remain unaware that it was being executed or there was a high chance of them retreating. That would make causing them a huge amount of damage, like the King wanted, impossible.

“Yes. Furthermore, it would be hard to completely exterminate groups thousands strong. We have to start attacking their small units before they gather together.”

“Exterminate completely, sir?”

“If even one of them escapes, our counterattack would be discovered. We have to kill them all. No survivors.”

“...I see.”

“Which is why we have to attack them while they are still moving in groups couple hundred strong. And why we’ll head out now.”

“Straight into the war zone without any delay, huh...”

Gran Flamm’s counterattack would be launched pretty much from in front of the capital. But still it was quite a distance from this place in the southern region.

“Did you not understand me? The enemy is regrouping as we speak and you’re just idling here. We must attack now.”

“Right now, sir?”

“Immediately send messengers to the odd-numbered units. They are to split into platoons and head straight south along the roads connecting towns and villages. They need to reach the destination while avoiding engagement with the enemies.”

“...That’s impossible.”

This order would effectively make the kingdom’s forces and the enemies switch places, James did not think this could possibly be done.

“It is your bureau’s job to make it a reality. Send instructions to your people – abandon all posts on the early warning line, regroup with the army, help them get south.”

“Sir! That’s a huge change from the agreed plans!”

Doing that would mean discarding the carefully prepared warning line. The number of troops on the combat line would also be reduced by half making it considerably thinner compared to the initial plans. James thought that this would destroy all the previously agreed arrangements.

“Nothing changes. This is in accordance with my original strategy. The main principle of the plan always was to attack even if attacked.”

“...But if this fails.”

“If troops moving south come into contact with the enemy, they should engage. We will be fine as long as we grasp the initiative while they are still dispersed. Assuming the redeployment to the south succeeds, we will be able to inflict huge losses by

attacking from behind.

Rion casually dismissed James' worries. It wasn't that he ignored his concerns, he just couldn't see what could possibly be the problem.

"...Can we really do that?"

"Nothing's certain. But I'm not trying to achieve the impossible."

If Sol were to be asked about this, he would likely answer that such a thing was only possible under Rion. Not that the young Frey was aware of this.

"...Alright people, you heard what sir Frey said. Abandon the warning line, each second unit is to send messengers to the front line troops, the rest will regroup with us. We are switching our stance to attack. Go!"

All the bureau members left at once as instructed by James. Only people remaining in the headquarters were the bureau head, Rion, and Sol.

"What is it now?"

Seeing a smile on Sol's face, Rion asked with irritation.

"Oh, nothing. Everything simply went as I expected it to."

"As you expected? Meaning?"

"In the end, you invented a strategy that nobody but you can implement."

"That's patently false. Aren't they attempting the same right now?"

"...They?"

"The enemy. They are attempting an invasion by dispersing their forces into multiple small units. To a certain extent, their decisions to use pre-set routes is based on the fact that moving troops wouldn't be able to deal with unexpected changes properly."

"...Really?"

Sol couldn't say whether that was truth or not based on this explanation alone. In the

end, Rion was the only person capable of judging whether Merica's strategy was the same as his or not.

"Yes, I do. Which makes me wonder, just who the commander of the enemy is?"

"I believe it would be Olivia Clockford. A princess of the Kingdom of Merica, one called the War Goddess."

Sol was only guessing here, but a commander evaluated by Rion this highly had to be her. The fame of the War Goddess reached even the Kingdom of Gran Flamm, she was one of the greatest generals in her land.

"Oh, so she's taking part in the war even though she's the princess. I thought she would have a crude, masculine, personality, but judging by this strategy, that can't be the case."

"...I heard that she was rather beautiful, actually."

Olivia was given her moniker not only due to her commanding ability but also, or rather especially, because of her outward appearance. When this information had reached him in the past, it had made Rion think that her personality must have been crude, a conclusion that completely mystified Sol.

"So, her outward appearance is different to her personality... I see, supreme commander, a princess."

"I believe it would be best not to underestimate her because of her gender. We do not have much information on the subject, but Merica had fought numerous war with the countries to their south. That was where she acquired her title, which makes me believe it was earned through skill."

"Don't worry, I will not be negligent for such a reason. But let's leave the subject for now. We do have to relocate"

"Where to?"

"Command post on the third warning line. I would prefer something closer to the front but that would make it hard for the messengers to move."

In other words, attempting to set up any closer to the capital than third warning line

would put them straight in the war zone. Sol gave up on asking why would that turn out to be the case.

“How can you possibly know that, sir?”

But James didn’t, and he wanted to know.

“...A hunch, I guess?”

The answer was just as Sol had expected. Once more he wondered just what could he possibly learn from Viscount Rion Frey.



Even though Merica’s army wasn’t even half-way through with their invasion plan, Rion already went on the offensive. Sol could only look at this in amazement.

He had always thought that what made Rion’s simultaneous operation strategy possible was not just his genius, but also the Bandeaux clansmen that had acted as his hands. But this time Rion was commanding the regular army of the kingdom. Sol was worried that things may not go as planned because of that.

However, Rion immediately showed that this was an easily solved problem. He aimed at the enemy’s camping locations. Having identified the ideal spots for overnight rest along the invasion routes, he sent the scouts there. First groups of enemy troops to arrive at those locations were allowed to depart unmolested while friendly squads were summoned to gather. Since the orders issued were simply to arrive at a destination, small mistakes from regular troops would not be a problem.

Once the summoned squads gathered, they were ordered to await further Merican units to arrive and ambush those. The enemy was to be allowed to set up camp uncontested and only attacked at sunrise. This was so no survivor manages to escape under the cover of darkness.

This exact tactic was being utilized at all the seven invasion routes chosen by Merica. The ambush locations, directions of attack, and a number of ambushers were coordinated by Rion in each instance. Regardless of his actual title, the burden of command still rested on his shoulders.

“Gather the prisoners in one place! Hurry!”

Once again, Gran Flamm’s soldiers had successfully carried out their surprise attack. Having many such victories under their belt already, their post-battle routine was well-practiced.

“Erase all the traces of battle! Don’t miss a single one!”

They’ve even gotten used to what to do in preparation for the next ambush. The campsite was tidied up and anything that could hint at a struggle removed. This had to be thorough, if the next enemy squad turned suspicious because of a shoddy job, their ambush might end up in failure.

But still, this couldn’t possibly be continued forever. The cover-up might be good for two to three battles, but fighting repeated battles in one place would eventually make erasing the traces no longer possible. And surely, the time had come when someone cautious could spot the strangeness of this camp site’s surroundings.

“I guess the decisive moment is at hand.”

One of the officers leading this ambush group realized this much and judged continuing further to be impossible.

“Are we done fighting?”

Hearing the commander muttering, one of the knights asked.

“No. We group with the other units and go north.”

“So this time we’re going north.”

“That’s going to be the final battle. We are to attack the enemy that moved ahead of us from the back. Once we crush them all, the victory will be ours.”

“This is called the pincer attack, right?”

“I suppose.”

“I was worried before about how this all would play out, but now that we’ve come this far, the results are clear. The commander who came up with this plan is a really

fearsome man.”

“Agreed. However, the battle is not over yet. Keep your guard up until we’re done.”

Half of that was what the officer had said to himself before. He had been of similar opinion when they had been ordered to go south. However, in the end, the numbers of the enemies encountered at one time since then had been at most a fifth, a quarter with bigger groups, of his own troop strength. They suffered casualties, obviously, but there were comparatively few and it should be similar for other ambush squads. Meanwhile, the enemy numbers had been considerably depleted.

So much, in fact, that it was hard to resist the feeling that the victory was a done deal. And those careless thoughts might have been what brought a divine punishment, if one was inclined to believe in the guiding hand of heavens, of course.

Although those promised would likely disagree with that being a reason.

“Enemy spotted!”

Those were the words that heralded doom.

“Enemy attack!? Where from!? How many!?”

“From the north, sir! Roughly... Four thousand! Wait, more are coming!”

“What!?”

Their own force was only a thousand strong. In complete contrast to the battles up to now, they were about to face opposition many times their number. All the dreams of victory disappeared from their minds.

“Retreat! Withdraw immediately! Hurry!”

Although the order to retreat was issued, their backs were facing the enemy land, not the kingdom. Still, beggars couldn’t be choosers, the enemy was attacking from the north, they could only flee south. So the ambush unit fled in that direction, aimlessly running for their lives.

And they weren’t alone, all other ambush locations witnessed similar scenes.

The counterattack of Merican Army had begun.

# Chapter 67

## The Side Event has not yet ended

While the battle with Merica was still ongoing, Arnold and the rest of the devil subjugation party had completed their mission and started on their way back to the capital.

Unbeknownst to anyone other than Maria, the strategy arc was also about to reach its final stage. Normally, that would mean harsher fights as they approached the climax of the story, but, this time, the mission went very well and they were able to return the capital faster than expected.

The devils and demons hadn't really grown weaker. In fact, their individual strength didn't really change and their numbers had even increased so much that this subjugation had been expected to be a close fight. There was another reason why the subjugation ended so well.

"This time, I'm satisfied with our battles! Surely, milord will shower us with praise!"

Apollo was shouting loudly, obviously fired up. He had repeated this line so many times that other people had lost count by now. He wasn't drunk, for a change, just really elated. And he had been like that even before the latest battle.

The Bandeaux Clans had contributed tremendously in this devil subjugation. So much, in fact, that others had been made to feel as if their personal power had grown by a level or two.

"Do you really believe milord to have that kind of soft personality? If you tell him that you were satisfied with your performance, you might even get scolded for allowing self-satisfaction to stunt your growth."

Mo-Heitor was the one to offer chastisement, but even he sounded like he was enjoying his life right now.

"You're right! Milord is definitely not only strict on himself but on others too, and equally so! Really, for life to be so hard for those who serve him!"

Apollo might have started to complain as usual, but he was no longer looking gloomy while at it. It was almost as if the rebuke made him happier.

“I believe we should put some more thought into our way of fighting. While Chief Apollo might have been able to improve the cooperation within his troops, that’s merely one of the foundations, is it not?”

Kiel volunteered that it might be too early to pat themselves on the back.

“One of the foundations? How do you see them applied?”

“I believe we must be able to lead our cavalry in a manner that exemplifies each of our clan’s special traits. Now that we are able to match each other’s movements while in combat, we must apply our clan’s unique features to how we fight. If we do that, the results will surely be of use to Lord Rion, and the Bandeaux forces will definitely grow stronger as a result.”

This was not a sudden realization. Kiel, in his own way, had been thinking of how to strengthen the Clan army all this time.

“...As expected of Kiel! He understands milord very well! Hmm, special traits... I see. Our clan’s specialty is strength and the strength in cavalry terms is... Hmm, this is actually quite difficult.”

The strength of the cavalry was the charge. That being the case, Apollo was at a loss on how to exploit his clan’s trait, strength, in combat.

“The impact of a charge depends on the man and the horse both. Would using horses of larger build not help showcase your clan’s power?”

Kiel’s idea was simple. Apollo could show off the power of his clansmen better just by gathering stronger horses for them.

“Gather bigger horses, huh... I see, that can be done. Mhm, that’s a good idea.”

“Having the movements of the whole unit synchronized was what Lord Rion wished for. This is what brought this idea to me.”

Strong horses for Clan Yellow, fast Horses for Clan Green, and so on. Gathering horses with similar characteristics would complement the units themselves.

"I see. I knew it, milord was the reason, after all. As expected of our lord."

"Yes, as expected."

Kiel smiled dryly. This was the first time Apollo personally recognized Rion as their lord. To Kiel that, and Apollo's merry mood, was amusing but also something to be happy about.

To those who didn't know the circumstances, however, the reasons behind the clansmen and Apollo's boisterousness were a mystery.

"...Pray tell, did something happen?"

One of those puzzled people, Crown Prince Arnold, turned around to ask Cassius riding right behind him.

"...I believe Apollo has finally realized how favored we are."

The head of Clan Red looked slightly embarrassed while answering the question of the young prince. Having to answer in a roundabout manner didn't sit well with him.

"Favored? What is this about?"

Arnold didn't understand the reply at all and thus was dissatisfied with the answer.

"...It seems that our lord was able to see through our feelings perfectly. Even though we thought that he didn't want to associate with us, it seems he has been looking at us and thinking of us the entire time. And now that we learned of the fact, this is the reaction. One worthy of a previously sulking child."

"Is that so..."

Understanding that the Bandeaux Clansmen were happy at being recognized by their lord stirred conflicting feelings in Arnold. He wanted to be acknowledged himself. He wanted his subordinates to seek recognition as the clansmen had. And he wanted it so much that it nearly caused him to sulk too.

"It may be presumptuous of me, but I do believe Your Highness to be an excellent lord as well."

Cassius decided to console the young royal having noticed his cloudy expression. This was both out of consideration for the prince and out of the desire to not have him resent Rion.

"I am nothing of the sort. I have blundered heavily in the past."

"I believe milord thinks the same, Highness."

"Rion does? Why do you say that?"

"Ah... Well..."

Cassius regretted the slip of the tongue. He had failed to keep in mind just who he was talking to.

"Why?"

"...I'm not sure if the subject is appropriate."

"I do not mind. Explain."

"...Very well, Highness. It is likely milord still laments the fact that he failed to save... Someone, and holds himself responsible for that person's fate."

Cassius didn't specify who he was talking about. Unsurprisingly, he still felt unwilling to utter Vincent's name in front of the prince. And besides, there was no need, it was obvious who he was talking about anyway.

"...Is that so."

"Hence now he is working many times harder than other people in order to prevent such a thing happening again. Or at least I believe that to be the case."

"Treating failures as a lesson, huh. That is not a mindset adopted easily."

"Isn't that something Your Highness does too?"

"...Am I?"

"Nowadays, Highness is willing to actually listen regardless of who the person

speaking is. And that can't be an easy thing for a crown prince."

Those days, if it was really needed, Arnold would listen to and heed the opinion of Cassius and the others despite all of them being subordinates of a minor vassal. Normally, their social position would prohibit them from even exchanging a word with the prince.

However, Arnold was no longer a man to pay attention to such a rule. For Cassius and the others, that was a likable quality.

No matter how much they tried, they couldn't match this young royal to the image of Rion's old enemy and this was the reason why Cassius thought that the young prince must have changed.

"I wonder if that's really the case."

The change would be truly obvious if he were to be compared to his past self. That younger Arnold felt repulsed by the praise from others and never tried to listen to what they had to say. He *\*had\** changed.

"I believe so, Highness."

"...I see."

Arnold smiled shyly at those words. Cassius couldn't shake the feeling that this expression was similar to the one Rion tended to show to the extremely limited circle of people in whose company he felt relaxed.

"I have one more thing to say, albeit it might be nonsense. Would Highness like to hear it?"

And he decided to try to express those feelings in words.

"I do not mind."

"I think it's not good to be always conscious about one's past mistakes. This doesn't mean one should forget about them, of course, but focusing on one's past failures too much makes moving on impossible. Just how it was for us, the Clans, in the past..."

"That... However..."

Arnold thought that the gap between him and Rion was too far too wide, on a completely different scale than the one separating the young Frey from Cassius and others.

“I am aware that it’s not something simple. However, it’s not possible to move forward by doing nothing. That is something milord says often.”

“It is not possible to move forward by doing nothing, huh? I did hear that kind of thing from him many times.”

“So it is, Highness.”

As he said this to the prince, Cassius started to think he wanted Rion to give up his revenge. He thought that if it was Rion, he might be able to accomplish his vengeance no matter how hard a task it would be. However, once the deed was done, he wouldn’t be able to live in the Kingdom of Gran Flamm any longer and Bandeaux would end up losing their irreplaceable lord. There was still a possible path for Bandeaux to revolt against the kingdom but Cassius personally desired that future no longer. Not because he feared defeat, but because he wanted to see Rion accomplish even bigger feats with a larger army at his disposal.

If he were to be supported by the Gran Flamm’s strength, Rion might even be able to accomplish domination over the whole continent. Tentatively the head of Clan Red started to share the King’s ambition.

“...What is happening?”

Suddenly Arnold asked a question, his eyes locked on a single approaching rider. That person carried an emblem of a royal messenger and must have come straight from the capital.

“I will find out at once, Highness.”

Numerous knights of the prince’s royal guard moved forward to intercept. They came back together with the lone rider, confirming that he was indeed a messenger without any problems. However, the message that he came to deliver was a source of alarm to Arnold.

“I bear a message from the capital, Highness.”

“I see. What happened?”

“The forward headquarters of the interception force suffered enemy assault. The status of the Head of Information Control Frey and others present on site is unknown.”

“What did you say!?”

One could almost say that the prince’s fears were on the money, but even he didn’t expect the situation to be so grave. Arnold was stupefied and could only shout in alarm.

“Following that, the communication lines crumbled and the situation of one half of the army is also unknown.”

“N-No way!?”

This time the shout of surprise was Lancelot’s, not Arnold’s. The prince, as opposed to others, was able to infer the collapse of the front from the first line of the message.

Even Maria and Erwin were shocked, all of them became pale upon hearing the report.

“The remaining half of the army is reforming the lines to assume a defensive posture, but remains blind to the movements of the Merica Army and cannot judge if it’s strong enough to repel the enemy. The subjugation force is hereby ordered to return to the capital with all haste and regroup with the interception force. That is all, Highness.”

The messenger didn’t spare even a moment for the reactions of the recipients of his message. He recited the whole thing in one go.

“...My reply is – I shall not return.”

“Haa?”

This time, it was the messenger’s turn to be surprised.

“It would be a waste of time. I will head towards the interception force to regroup with them immediately.”

“Y-yes, Your Highness.”

Even before this conversation was wrapped up, one portion of the demon subjugation army was already on the move, the one that wore armor in four distinct colors, the Clans. They departed immediately, even before the crown prince spoke. They couldn't remain calm hearing about Rion's unexpected peril.

That decision was a violation of the military chain of command and dereliction of duty, but Arnold chose to cover up for them. And even if they had not done that, the prince would've most likely decided to head straight to the interception force anyway.

After all, he, just like the Bandeaux Clansmen, couldn't remain calm after what he had just heard.



There was a certain fort at a considerable distance from both where the demon subjugation army was presently at, and the capital. It was a stronghold built by the Gran Flamm Kingdom in order to protect their borders with Merica. The terrain of the southern Kingdom was mostly a flat stretch of plains, but this particular region was mountainous. Hence, this fort was surrounded by peaks and sandwiched between a pair of high cliffs making it a fearsome defensive position.

At the moment it was under observation by several people, namely Rion and Sol whom the Army currently considered missing.

"Are we really going to do this?"

"A bit late to ask that now, don't you think? Just how hard do you think it was to climb here?"

"No need to remind me. I experienced it myself, after all."

"Could it really be so taxing on you?"

"It was. But can we focus on the subject, please? Can we really capture that?"

They came to this place for one reason, to capture the fortress right in front of them.

"I'm here because I think it's possible, obviously. Don't you think reaching it was actually rather easy?"

“True, but...”

Being on top of the cliff overlooking the fortress might indeed be a favorable attacking position. However, Sol was not such an optimist to think that taking this place would be simple.

“This fortress can only really resist attacks coming from the direction of Merica. The defenses from this side, as you can see yourself, are nowhere near as imposing. There’s plenty of blind spots that make approach easy and the side gate for supply wagons is rather brittle when compared to the main gate

“...Astounding. Why do you know that much?”

It was almost as though Rion had been considering attacking this particular fortress from the very beginning. Which raised a question why he had thought that to be necessary.

“While I was mulling over the strategy to use, I was presented with a mountain of information. I’ve read it in one of those reports.”

“Still, That does not explain why you decided to memorize even the details of border fortresses.”

“I memorize all the information I am given. It’s not possible to tell how and where the fight will actually unfold, right? Furthermore, this kind of situation is not really outside of our expectations, is it?”

“...True, I guess.”

On the day the headquarters had been attacked, Sol had thought that Merica had turned on them out of the blue. But he had not been correct, there had been prior enemy movements indicating such an attack had been possible. Sol had just missed them.

Rion, on the other hand, having seen through the situation, had chosen to escape before they could get surrounded by the enemies and had managed to slip away unnoticed. He had even prepared a fake corpse to cover his escape and had set the village on fire as the first enemy units had entered it.

He had obviously been well prepared for the event.

“There was also a possibility we would end up having to defend a fort in the course of battle. This kind of knowledge is necessary.”

“Alright, I get it. Enough explanations.”

All those reasons were believable, yet Sol felt like the whole thing got even stranger.

“Hey, you did ask. Enough chit-chat, time to start. Let’s see, what should we aim for...”

“...Do you find this fun?”

“Eh? More idle chatter?”

“Well, you seemed to be having fun.”

“I’m not enjoying this at all. Honestly, I’m in a bad mood. If I really looked like having fun, that’s because the thought of payback warms my heart.”

“...I see.”

Their headquarters had been right under the enemy’s nose and Rion had already taken the possibility of enemy attack into consideration. However, the scale of enemy action had been outside of his expectation and so had been their movements. Merica’s forces had completely ignored the Kingdom’s army arrayed in front of the capital and had turned all its troops against the flanking units on its rear.

This had caused confusion in Gran Flamm’s chain of command which had further enabled Merica’s attack. The attacked Kingdom’s troops had had no choice but to keep fleeing south until Rion had managed to reestablish contact with them.

The youth had not simply been trying to escape, he had attempted to gather all the scattered forces as he had moved. He had succeeded at that. Obviously, he couldn’t get them all, but he had assembled enough to storm a fortress.

“Honestly, I want to capture her, but how is her personal prowess, I wonder?”

“Capture who?”

“Who? The princess, isn’t that obvious? Hmm... If she’s called a war goddess, she must be strong. Capturing her won’t be easy.”

“Wait a minute. Is Princess Olivia in this fort?”

Sol had never heard about this and he was just about to start complaining again.

“Are you even listening to me? I did say that I came here for payback, didn’t I? Obviously, this means breaking the enemies’ chain of command.”

But the desire waned faced with Rion’s reply that once again broke boundaries of common sense.

“...Fine. How did you figure this out?”

“Overseeing a numerous invasion army can only be done from a central position. But this time, the commander is also a princess. She can’t be taking the same risk I have taken, she’s unlikely to be right at the front.”

“...That is not enough to point at this fort.”

“Then, you yourself said that her personality is not crude. A princess like that would never stay in a camp. But someone called a war goddess would not remain in her own territory either.”

“So she would take one of our castles instead...”

Sol was surprised that Rion thought of this before he even came up with this plan. In hindsight, when he had been asking about her in the past, he must have been already thinking of attacking the enemy command.

Just when Sol thought he was able to grasp the extent of Rion’s intellect, the boy showed yet more. This was already way past just surprising.

“I only thought of this place because we had enough information. It’s not as though I just went for it as soon as I came up with the possibility.”

Rion took Sol’s amazement as criticism of his rashness and started to make excuses, which in turn, made Sol even more amazed. Sol, despite always being next to him, couldn’t figure out just when did he get all the information he was talking about.

“...How shall we take it then?”

Reassured that Rion was acting out of a justified confidence of success, Sol stopped complaining and put his mind to the execution of this plan.

“We do not have to take it. It’s enough to drive the enemy out of this fortress. Once they are outside, we pursue to keep them in disorder and give them no time to issue commands. That’s the objective.”

“Understood.”

The goals of this plan were clear and realistic. But it also implied pursuit into Merican territory, something that could possibly be overambitious.

“Alright, everyone’s gathered up. Let’s go back and explain the plan. Then we move.”

“Yes, let’s do that.”



The subsequent battle at the border fortress started with a surprise attack by the Gran Flamm forces and ended in a rout of Merican army with no chance of counterattack. With this, the chain of command of Merican forces had crumbled and the Gran Flamm southern region became a scene of a chaotic battle between both armies that roamed the region without direction.

As a result, the Merican government judged the invasion no longer feasible and the event leading to the fall of Gran Flamm’s capital was avoided.

In the game, this war was merely covered by background narration, but as the outcome changed, the capital city recovery event would not trigger now. The game scenario was officially in ruins.

# Chapter 68

## Situation Reversal

The war between the Kingdom of Gran Flamm and the Kingdom of Merica concluded with the former's victory, since Merica not only failed to achieve its objectives but also suffered huge losses in the process.

The headquarters of the commander in charge, Princess Olivia, fell which resulted in a total collapse of the chain of command. The Merican Army was unable to recover from the subsequent confusion in the time required to receive the attack of the Gran Flamm Army composed of the so-far-idle part of the interception group and the demon subjugation forces.

In the campaign that pitched a disorganized Merican Army without a master plan against a well-led, cohesive Gran Flamm Army, the former was left with no choice but to retreat. The resulting pursuit accomplished exactly what the King wished for – it caused enormous damage to the enemy.

If only the other half of the army had not been lost, the results would have been perfect. The situation of those troops was yet to be confirmed.

“...Why have you not found them yet?”

The King was highly dissatisfied by the Intelligence Bureau's reports on that matter.

“The search is ongoing, Majesty. However, considering that most of the enemy forces left our territory at this point yet they are still missing...”

The campaign in the southeast had pretty much reached its conclusion already. Despite that, the fate of the troops that had gone to outflank the Merican Army remained a mystery. Based on that, the Bureau came to a conclusion that those units were completely crushed by the Merican forces.

“If what you say is correct, explain the lack of bodies?”

“They might have been taken captive, Sire.”

“An army of ten thousand? All of them captive?”

“That...”

That kind of thing was hard to believe. Merica would have sent a communique about that. They suffered huge losses and feared a counter-invasion. Ten thousand war prisoners would make a perfect bargaining chip to prevent that.

“Just what is the Intelligence Bureau doing!?”

The war was won, yet the situation played out in a way that made the King’s mood hit rock bottom. He was grieving over the fact that he had lost Rion because of a petty border conflict. Both as the monarch and as a father.

But the worst thing of all was that he had no words of consolation to offer to the Queen who was going mad due to grief. She had finally met the child she had thought lost forever to her and it brought her great joy. And now, facing the fact she had most likely lost her son again made her heart bleed.

“...We are exhausting all of our resources, my King, but our losses in this war were also severe.”

Many of the Bureau’s members that acted as the information network for Rion’s plan were still missing in action.

“Then why are you here?”

“Majesty?”

“If you lack people, go out into the field too! And speaking of that, how come you are here safe when the others are not?”

The King was speaking to James who should have been at Rion’s side. The fact that he was safe in the capital while Rion was not was quite puzzling.

“This has been explained already, Sire. The stream of messages between us and the field units stopped abruptly. I lead a team of operatives out to investigate and, while we were away, Merica...”

–attacked Rion’s command post. James, having dodged that bullet by pure luck,

decided not to get tangled in the mess and return to the capital to bring news.

He had explained that to the King many times already, the monarch was just venting.

“...Attack Merica right now. Hurry, prepare the army.”

The King looked at the Marshall of the Crown while saying this.

“My king...”

“Did you not hear Us!? Gather an army and destroy Merica immediately!”

“That is not possible, sire.”

Only one person could respond in this way while facing the full wrath of the King, Knight Commander Frederick.

“...This is a royal order. Make it happen.”

Facing his most loyal retainer, the King reined in his fury a little. But he did not change his mind.

“Even so, it is a vassal’s duty to point out the impossible.”

“Why is it impossible? We have read the reports, a considerable number of enemies perished,.”

“And we too are missing ten thousand soldiers. Not to forget that the devil threat is not over yet. We have no leeway for aggressive wars, Sire.”

If Gran Flamm had the capability to successfully invade while also subjugating the demons, Merica would never have dared to attack in the first place. The war had been won, but it did not result in an overwhelming difference in power.

“...Are We just to swallow the offense of this invasion?”

“Oh no, Sire, they will be made to pay. But by diplomats, not soldiers.”

“Then how can We have Our revenge?”

“A war of revenge will not end until the enemy is utterly exterminated.”

“This is not what We are talking about!”

The king wanted to exact revenge for Rion and Frederick understood that perfectly. He was just pretending not to. He didn't actually think that Rion was dead.

“What is more, My King, if we are really going to fight them again, should we not set our own house in order first?”

“Our own house?”

“The missing army of ten thousand... Suppose they made it out alive, where do you think they can be, Majesty?”

“...Commander Frederick?”

When he had ordered the search, the King had assumed that all of them perished. However, now the Knight Commander was raising an opposite option.

“While it is understandable if they were truly dead, does Majesty not find the idea itself, of looking for an army that size, odd?”

“Where do you think they are?”

“If we cannot find them in our own lands, then there is only one possibility left, although that place is equally vast.”

“...Are you trying to suggest they are in Merica?”

“That may be so, Sire.”

“...What have you uncovered?”

The Knight Commander wasn't a man to make an unfounded claim like this and the King knew this facet of Frederick's personality very well.

“The Bandeaux Army is absent from the fief and Viscountess herself has left quite a while ago. All this was reported by the messenger I have dispatched to bring them the news.”

“...Meaning?”

This was not enough information for the King to get a clear picture. The connection between the Bandeaux Clans mobilizing and the likelihood of his missing army being inside the borders of Merica also eluded him.

“Said Bandeaux Army cannot be found within the borders of our kingdom, Majesty. Neither are there any traces that they have entered other fiefs. Makes you wonder, just where have they sneaked off to?”

“...Out with it already, man. That love of teasing you have is a really bad habit.”

This betrayed that the King had roughly figured out the situation and his feelings were already back in order.

“If Majesty gave it one more moment of thought, I am certain it would be obvious. There is only one way to disappear from one fief without entering any of the others, and that is to cross the national border. Which raises a question, why would they do that?”

“Frederick, really, enough riddles.”

“...Good grief. Very well, Sire, but do keep in mind I have no evidence for my conjectures.”

“Yes, yes. Duly noted.”

“It should be obvious that the Army of Bandeaux will not move out without an order of its lord, Viscount Frey. Therefore the only reason why they crossed borders must be that they were ordered to do so. And if that indeed happened, then all this had been predicted by our missing Head of Information Control.”

Those words raised an uproar in the room. Most of the people present were simply surprised, but a few of the faces present turned pale instead. Frederick made a mental note of that reaction.

“Why do you think so?”

“Few reasons Majesty. First is that his wife did not accompany him in battle. It is common knowledge that trivial things like extreme danger never stopped her in the

past.”

So far the Frey couple had fought together at every occasion and had even stood shoulder to shoulder on the front line. Even though Rion’s mission this time was special, the Knight Commander did not expect that to be any obstacle. He had been convinced for a while now that they were the kind of a couple that did not fear death and would accept it when it came.

“So his intention was to have her lead those troops from the very beginning.”

“That I cannot tell for sure, but it would not be the first time she leaves for war alongside them.”

“...Was the leadership of Bandeaux Clans not involved in the subjugation all this time? What use can a small reserve force be for him?”

“The nature of the troops left behind in the fief is unclear, Majesty. They are known to call themselves Viscount Frey’s personal guard.”

“Rion’s personal guard, huh?”

Hearing they were supposedly serving under Rion, the King no longer expected those soldiers to be ordinary.

“Again, their war potential is unclear. And even more uncertainty creeps in when one considers the route they had to take. Does Majesty remember which countries border Bandeaux?”

“Kingdoms of Orcus and Hashu are cooperating with them? Surely not.”

Such a situation would be rather problematic. It was not possible for a state to turn a blind eye when its puppet kingdoms deployed their armies of their own initiative. Even if it was done against a common enemy.

“As I mentioned at the beginning Sire, this is all speculations. Nevertheless, I am sure that Viscountess would even move the Kingdom of Merica itself for the sake of her husband.”

In the end, the Knight Commander played down his theory and finished with a quip, all to not inflame the delicate situation about the actions of the Orcus and Hashu

kingdoms.

“They do get along so very well after all.”

The King played along understanding the sentiment.

“I will dispatch my subordinates to Merica immediately.”

James joined the conversation at this point expecting evidence to be required to confirm the Knight Commander’s theory.

“Admirable, but sadly too late. If Viscount Frey did lead his army into the enemy’s territory it wouldn’t be to invade, but to escape.”

“Does that not make verifying the situation and sending reinforcements all the more pressing?”

“Any reinforcements we would dispatch now would not make it in time either. That man is not the type to get tied down in pointless battles. Whatever he does there, he is much more likely than not to be at the border of Orcus already. If you want to act, do it when he contacts us.”

“...I understand, Commander Frederick.”

James agreed, albeit grudgingly. He could not dispute the Knight Commander’s arguments.

“Given the situation all that is left to Us is to hope that matters are as sir Frederick hypothesised. Any kind of diplomatic intervention is plainly impossible. Let us move on. We would like to hear the Prime Minister speak about the plans to rejuvenate the areas affected by the war.”

“Yes, My King. When it comes to that matter...”

The King’s mood was very calm now compared to how it had been before. He believed Frederick’s assumptions to be correct, and he was not mistaken in this. Rion was at this point indeed fighting on the Merican soil.

However, the Knight Commander hadn’t said everything he had learned because the situation, and present company, did not allow for full disclosure. The King couldn’t

know his mood would take a sharp turn for the worse soon.



When Rion had attacked the Merican Army headquarters, he had not faced a numerous opposition. Only enemies present were the escorts of their commander-in-chief, Princess Olivia.

This had been undeniably unlucky for Merica. As a result, they had ended up driven out of that fortress and chased all the way back into their territory by the nine thousand soldiers under Rion.

That state of things couldn't last of course.

After all, the quarry had now been running through a friendly territory and once the nearby garrisons and retinues had learned of the situation, reinforcements and relief had begun to trickle in from all around. Eventually, the pursued had grown strong enough to turn on, and overwhelm, the pursuers.

The roles had reversed. Now it was the Gran Flamm army's turn to start running hopelessly. But, even at this point, nothing would go according to Merica's wish.

"Keep attacking! Do not allow them to escape this time!"

The voice of the Merican Princess rang in the air. Her enemies were retreating, true, but in an organized manner and at a reasonable pace.

And, while on the back foot, they counterattacked viciously whenever they spotted an opening. Those openings were not rare occurrences either, the Merican forces were a mixture of various units and formations. Their cooperation was impressive, but there was a noticeable lack of coherence.

"Magic corps! Attack the enemy vanguard!"

Following Olivia's orders, the magicians of her army started their arias. And as before, they were assaulted by hostile magic at this exact moment.

The enemy's spells were not many, but they struck just as her own mages were defenseless while chanting and they reaped a heavy toll.

“...This again. Just what is happening!?”

This kind of scene had played itself out a number of times now. Every time Merican magic users stepped forward to attack, they were checked by the enemy like this. The Princess clearly felt she was slowly losing the upper hand despite the overwhelming advantage in numbers. Her own magic potential was being worn out while the enemy's remained unchanged.

She watched as those of her mages that managed to finish their spells unaffected launched their magic successfully. She again witnessed most of those spells being shot down by counter-magic and the rest deflected harmlessly.

A magical assault was never certain to inflict damage. Depending on the type of the spell, even an intermediate level of magic could be deflected by a well-positioned shield of a trained knight. Advanced class spells would be much more certain to do damage, but the mana requirements of those were insane and not many mages were capable of using them. They could only be feasibly used when the circumstances presented a vulnerable, trapped enemy.

It was a truism that stronger spells would win duels, but wars were not affairs of individuals.

“Bring down the vanguards in one go! Now!”

Nevertheless, the Princess chose to use such magic. She could not afford to let the Gran Flamm army escape from here. All the battles in this campaign had turned out to be a huge personal humiliation. She had never experienced such a thing. She had never had to turn her back to an enemy and flee.

Earlier on, she could reason those defeats away with her numerical disadvantage. But now that excuse was gone and the situation showed no signs of improving. True, she might no longer be the one fleeing but seeing her army be chased off the field whenever it displayed an opening gave her fits from anger.

“...Have a taste of my vengeance! Aqua Storm!”

She successfully chanted an aria and conjured a huge water tornado out of thin air. The water vortex swayed and shook as it advanced on the Gran Flamm formation. She could already imagine it crushing their lines and flinging numerous enemies high in the air, but it never made it there. A single man stepped out of the ranks, made a

crushing gesture with his hand and her spell unraveled, collapsing on itself harmlessly.

“...What... kind of person? Just what on earth is that guy!?”

She would begrudgingly admit that it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that her army experienced such a rough war because of this man. He was in charge of the enemy forces and he commanded an astonishing type of magic capable of crushing anything magical Merica had to offer.

“Rion Frey. I have heard the rumors, but this is beyond my expectations. He really is splendid.”

Yuri Stewart, the royal guard of princess Olivia gave his honest impression.

“...Did the rumors describe someone strong enough to warrant the name of a demon or something?”

The guardsman's behavior calmed down the feelings of the Princess. It was made obvious by the change in how she spoke and it was something Yuri had aimed for.

“I couldn't possibly tell, My Lady. There was certainly no exaggeration when people were gossiping that a hero was born on the Gran Flamm soil.”

The rumors regarding Rion had even reached the Merica Kingdom. They had been guaranteed to do so, in fact. A country like Merica would not slack off on the information gathering and their excellent intelligence network had been one of the reasons they had thought they could win the war at this moment in time.

And they would have been right if not for the fact Rion, on whose ability they had had no good read, had been in charge of the defense effort.

“He will truly turn into one if we let him escape. We cannot possibly allow such a thing to happen.”

“Yes, Lady, I am aware of that. However, you must not become flustered. Make taking him down here for sure a priority above all else.”

“You are right, of course. And while I do not want to use our trump card...”

“It will remain hidden if he dies. Let us dispatch a messenger. If we are able to secure

the rear of the planned location, he will no longer have a way out. Not just Rion Frey, we will be able to defeat all the invasion force.”

“Agreed. Let’s wish for that to happen.”

Thus, Merica decided to use the ace in its sleeve that it had kept hidden until now. But, at that time, they still did not know it would soon lose all value. After all, they were not the only one with hidden trump cards.

# Chapter 69

## The Conclusion Of The War Is A Start Of Another Battle

Ultimately, Rion's forces retreated to a place located a short distance from the border between the Kingdom of Merica and the Kingdom of Orcus. The only thing separating them from salvation and successful escape was a hilly area of no-man's-land.

However, the Gran Flamm army stopped at the border of the region and started to reform ranks instead of pressing on. There were no signs of yet another counterattack, just one, purely defensive, square.

"...Have we been found out?"

Princess Olivia sounded worried seeing that behavior. There was no other reason for them to stop here and do that.

"It matters little, Lady. We are here, all that remains is to shut the trap around them."

"True, I guess."

Olivia's plan was to seal the escape routes of the Gran Flamm's forces in this hilly region, encircle them, and exterminate with a pincer attack. All preparations for this had been completed.

"Let us proceed, then. Vanguard, advance! Crush the Gran Flamm Army!"

Triggered by the voice of the Princess, the vanguard troops of Merican Army started advancing all at once. They alone matched the whole remaining Gran Flamm Army.

And so, yet another battle in this pursuit commenced. By now, the Mericans had lost count of how many of those had been fought.

And the results of this one thus far were also familiar, the formations of the Gran Flamm troops remained stubbornly solid and unbroken.

Seeing the deadlock, Olivia made another move.

“...Have the main forces advance.”

“Will that not delay the encirclement, My Lady?”

The original strategy called for the main forces to set up an encircling net along the right and left sides of the battle while the vanguard kept the enemy pinned in place. Having them proactively attack the enemy so early was a marked departure from the original arrangements.

“The Gran Flamm army must be pushed into the hills before we think of that. The rearguard will take over from the main forces and set up the encirclement. The situation calls for the whole army to be sent into the battle.”

“...Understood, Lady.”

The headquarters were attached to the rearguard and this was where Olivia and Yuri were stationed. The Princess’ guardian felt somewhat hesitant about committing all the forces like that, but he decided to believe in Olivia, the War Goddess.

Sending the main force into combat more than doubled the number of Merican soldiers fighting. Rion’s forces, unable to handle this much pressure slowly started to fall back.

“Bring us closer to the frontline.”

“Yes, Lady.”

As she saw the plan of pushing the Gran Flamm Army where she wanted them become reality, Olivia decided to speed up the encirclement and advance with the rearguard now.

The signal to fully commit would be the sight of the friendly troops appearing from behind her enemies to conduct a surprise attack. Her order was to begin the preparations for that.

“Already?! Why are they here so fast?!”

A war banner unfurled on the hill behind the retreating Gran Flamm Army. The banner

was black with a sparrow over a new moon and it belonged to the Kingdom of Orcus. Olivia's army, however, was yet to push Rion's troops into a location suitable for a full encirclement or even advance close enough to make that possible as the plan demanded.

"Hurry up! Block the left flank of the Gran Flamm Army! And send messengers to the main force, they are to seal the right flank of the enemy!"

The new arrivals prompted Olivia into huge readjustments of her formation in order to set up the encirclement in time. Perhaps due to having noticed this development, the Gran Flamm army also started to shuffle around busily. And while that was going on, the Orcus army started its attack too.

"Unbelievable! They were just supposed to seal the Gran Flamm's rear! How can they be making their betrayal so obvious!"

Olivia couldn't hide her frustration that the newly arrived army didn't move as planned. The Grand Flamm Army might get shaken by the betrayal of their ally, but now the area behind her enemy was full of openings that could allow them to escape. The meticulously planned encirclement net suddenly gained a hole.

"Make haste! We must at least try to reseal the openings behind them!"

The original plan had assumed that the war would finally be settled in this place. However, Olivia had now hastily given up on that and placed precedence on sealing Rion's escape route. As long as her enemies were kept within Merican land, there would be other opportunities to destroy them.

The rearguard under Princess Olivia that was leading the fight on the left flank now disengaged and started to circle the battlefield heading towards the enemy rear. That caused the column of troops to show flank to the Gran Flamm army.

A flank that was suddenly attacked by two spells in the shape of a bird.

"T-That's!?"

Olivia had a clear understanding of what was coming. A fire and a wind magic. Her surprise was caused by the sheer size of the effect and the fact she had never seen this exact spell before.

“Deploy a defensive magic! Hurry!”

Nevertheless, she recovered from her surprise quickly and instructed her subordinates to defend the formation. She also added her own magic to those efforts.

Numerous magical barriers unfurled mid-air. One of them was much larger than the others, that particular one belonged to the princess.

However, Merican attempts to counter the attack proved futile. The Gran Flamm spells simply avoided the barriers, as if alive, and found its mark.

The two birds flew to a space right above Olivia’s column, merged into one, and exploded.

The blast tore a huge gap in the rank of the soldiers flinging corpses high into the air.

“...What on earth just happened?”

Olivia was dumbfounded by the unbelievable development. She had never heard of magic capable of moving and acting freely as if self-aware.

This was in part because, so far, Rion had fought while hiding the true capability of his magic. But, here and now, he was finally ready to be done with the war and settle the scores. He no longer felt the need to hide his cards.

His army suddenly reformed its ranks, shedding all pretense of confusion and disorder, and he himself emerged from its ranks at the head of a cavalry unit.

His strategy was not really that different from the one he had used at Harcourt — throw enemy ranks into disarray with a large-scale magic attack, exploit the opening with a cavalry charge, and eliminate the leadership.

The only different element was the treasured personal guard that until now he had carefully protected and kept hidden at his side.

“...What are those?”

Olivia was referring to that exact cavalry unit of a personal guard that now appeared out of her enemy’s ranks. She wasn’t even sure if it was correct to call that formation cavalry. The Gran Flamm honor guard rode atop creatures that might have resembled

a normal horse but sported a horn on their foreheads.

She didn't know of Nightmare, so she couldn't know these creatures were of the same species, gathered and tamed for the use of the newly formed Beast Mounted Honor Guard Unit of Viscount Frey.

"...Those are... Demonic beasts... Possibly?"

Even Yuri couldn't tell for sure. For all of his career as a Royal Guard, he had never had a chance to subjugate a demonic beast. In fact, he had never actually seen one in person.

But he could tell that the incoming mounted formation advanced on them at an astonishing speed.

"Reform the ranks! Prepare to intercept the enemy cavalry!"

Flustered, Olivia began to order her army again. Those that heard her obeyed and arrayed in an orderly line in front of the beast riders. They stood no chance.

The infantry was annihilated in an instant, some simply pierced by the horns, some flung high and away. The human riders didn't even have to lift a finger.

Merica still held an advantage in numbers and more soldiers of the rearguard arrived to throw themselves at the enemy in order to blunt the charge. To no avail. Those that aimed for Rion at the tip of the spearhead were blown away without even getting close.

"...Amazing."

Inadvertently, Olivia voiced her admiration. That was just how terrific to behold Rion's way of fighting was with magic being constantly deployed around him and attacking anyone who tried to approach.

Yet as soon as Rion himself moved to attack, the magic around him transformed to defend him instead. Blades would be deflected, spells nullified... It was a complete method of fighting, one using both the sword and the sorcery. One without any flaws.

"My Lady, we need to flee."

Yuri was certain that the youth and his beast riders would not be stopped.

“Are you really telling me to run?”

“Yes. I am telling you exactly that.”

There was no more time for subtleties and Yuri answered frankly. The fall of Olivia would spell the loss of the battle. And the ultimate cost to the kingdom would be even higher.

“That... Is no longer an option, it seems.”

“Wha!?”

Olivia saw that another massive spell had been unleashed on her formation. This time it was a huge tornado that filled the sky as it went on a rampage across her ranks causing chaos and destruction in its wake.

The beast riders made perfect use of this opening and closed in on the Princess in one decisive push.

“...Are you the Princess?”

Olivia stared at the pair of red and blue eyes in front of her.

“You must be Viscount Rion Frey.”

“Correct. But there’s no time for pleasantries, Princess, I’m taking you captive”

“I shall not allow this.”

Yuri cut in between Rion and Olivia with his sword drawn.

“Nobody asks you. Or the Princess for that matter. Nightmare, fly.”

“What!?”

Nightmare soared over Yuri’s head, Rion safely on her back, landing right behind Olivia’s horse. The Princess, paralyzed by surprise, was dragged from the saddle by Rion straight onto the ground.

And then Nightmare immediately rested one of her front legs on the girl's back. It was an exemplary cooperation between the mount and its rider.

"Don't even twitch, sir knight! Try anything and the girl gets trampled into mud."

"You coward..."

"Call me what you wish. But you will have your army retreat for me, won't you?"

"..."

Yuri found himself hesitant to just agree. There was no guarantee that the Princess would be released even after Merican troops were called off.

"I see. Go ahead, Nightmare."

"Kyaaaaa!"

Rion didn't hesitate for a second. Nightmare never had any reason for hesitation in the first place. Olivia's scream rose into the sky.

"S-Stop it!"

Yuri pleaded in a hurry.

"You heard my demands, they didn't change. They withdraw, I stop. What happens to her is up to you."

"...Fine."

Yuri couldn't allow his royal charge to die, regardless of how unreasonable would the demands that followed be. He had to assent.

So he instructed the hostilities to cease and started preparing the army to withdraw, all the while looking for an opening to save Olivia. To no avail. No chances presented themselves.

At times when Rion looked distracted, Nightmare was vigilant. When the beast looked off focus, the rider had no vulnerabilities. Yuri could do nothing.

Eventually, with a look of deep anguish on his face and teeth gritted so tight it was almost audible, Yuri issued the order to leave the field. Both to the rearguard and the main forces.

“Tie the Princess up.”

Seeing the Mericans pull back a considerable distance, at last, Rion gave an order to one of his subordinates.

“Excuse me!?”

Olivia immediately voiced dissent.

“ You dare complain?”

“I certainly do. I am a princess of royal blood. I may be your captive, but I *\*will\** be treated with respect due to my rank.”

“Oh? Does such a custom exist?”

“Etiquette demands it. Sir.”

There indeed was a special privilege for captured royalty and nobility. But for them only. All other captives had no rights whatsoever and could be dealt with as one saw fit.

“...And you will not struggle?”

“I shall act as custom demands as long as proper treatment is extended to me.”

“...Should I trust you?”

“I do not lie! I am a princess of the Kingdom of Merica!”

“I have never met a human that doesn’t lie. But customs are customs, I guess. Do you require healing?”

“...If you would be so kind.”

Olivia looked flustered at finally being given the treatment she demanded. She hadn’t

actually made those demands because she considered the privilege indispensable. She simply didn't want to be tied up.

"Ari, I'll leave that to you. Give her a full examination too."

"Alright. I will handle this."

Rion left the healing and the body examination in capable hands of Ariel who suddenly appeared at his side.

She started by removing the sword at Olivia's waist. and, with the help of others, the Princess' armor. Then she went about collecting the weapon hidden underneath the breastplate and making sure no further surprises were to be found among the captive's clothes.

This was done while Olivia's body was still sore, but the girl's obstinate character made her keep mum.

Only when Ariel was sure no more concealed weapons would be found did she finally use the healing magic. Since the injuries in question were mostly bruises, not open wounds, they would not disappear, but the pain itself subsided noticeably.

After the treatment, Olivia was capable of standing up as if nothing happened to her.

"A horse will not be allowed unless Lady Olivia agrees to have the hands and feet bound. "

"...I gave my word I shall not escape."

"Unfortunately, experience left me with little trust in promises of the royalty."

"Do you think of having me walk the entire way?"

"Of course not. A carriage will be prepared for you."

"...May I ask, when?"

"That is a question for Prince Alexander, he is the one in charge of arrangements."

"...Prince Alexander?"

Hearing the name Olivia turned around and saw a familiar face hiding in the crowd. She was already acquainted with the prince of Orcus.

“I see, so you are in charge of arranging transportation. I look forward to seeing the kind of carriage you shall procure, Alexander.”

“Y-Yes. O-Of course. I will prepare a splendid carriage that will live up to cousin Olivia’s expectation.”

“Splendid. Please do so. Do you not think it would be wonderful for your kingdom to meet my expectations in the same way?”

“We... There were circumstances...”

The Kingdom of Orcus should have invaded Gran Flamm at the same time Merica had launched its attack. Yet here they were, not only dishonoring that agreement but even switching sides once the war had started. Olivia considered this an unforgivable betrayal.

That betrayal, however, was forced by the Bandeaux Clans led by Ariel in cooperation with the armies of Hashu. Roughly at the moment when Merican troops crossed the Gran Flamm border for the first time, the joint Bandeaux-Hashu army marched into Orcus territory under the pretext of fulfilling the alliance obligations. Had Bandeaux forces trespassed unassisted, the Orcus Kingdom would try to fight them. But Hashu was a country of comparable power, and with the news of the interception in progress, the alliance with Merica was no longer tenable.

“Oh, you know each other? That’s good.”

Having witnessed this exchange, Rion called out to Alexander.

“Like you did not know that already...”

The Prince was not a fool. He had understood nearly as soon as Orcus was “visited” by its allies that Rion had been aware of the agreement with Merica and that the young viscount had exploited that knowledge for gain.

Having fallen for his schemes again, Alexander found himself in the worst kind of situation. One where he would be responsible for the imprisonment of Olivia. He now had no choice but obey any and all of Gran Flamm’s whims.

However, Rion, as usual, thought further ahead.

“Then, with that tiny detail no longer a problem, I will have you host the Princess in the Orcus Kingdom for the time being. After all, Bandeaux is completely unsuitable for that purpose.”

“...Can you repeat that, please?”

“I will be leaving the Princess in your care, please treat her well on my behalf.”

“Are you serious?”

“You two are apparently acquainted, this should make her more at ease. I will require her to visit Bandeaux at times, of course, but let’s think of that as sightseeing, alright?”

“...Is that so.”

Alexander was at a loss. His country had clearly committed treason against its supposed ally, Gran Flamm and yet they were entrusted with a very important prisoner just like that. Was Rion implying that it was fine for Olivia to flee? Was he that confident that Orcus could not afford another treachery? The Prince was inclined to believe in the former.

After all, a detailed investigation proved conclusively that Rion had little loyalty or regard for the Kingdom of Gran Flamm.

“What are you doing?!”

Rion’s allegiance might have been nonexistent, but Sol was present and very loyal. With the battle over, he separated from the troops and came over to join Rion.

“What are you on about?”

“The captured Merican Princess. Is it not obvious to hold her at the capital?”

“She was captured by me. She is mine.”

This rather ambiguous statement raised a blush on Olivia’s cheeks and a stern look in Ariel’s eyes.

“What are you even thinking!?”

Sol didn't get any weird ideas, he just flared up in rage.

“We did have our retribution for the surprise attack on the command post. But only as far as Merica is concerned.”

“...Explain?”

Sol had by now gotten used to Rion's occasionally confusing pattern of speech. He grasped that there was someone else apart from Merican army that was overdue some payback. He just didn't see who could that be.

“Don't tell me that you didn't notice at all?”

“...Noticed what?”

Sol hadn't noticed. It would be much stranger if he had...

“How do you suppose Merica found our command post?”

“By the movements of the messengers or something like that, I guess?”

Sending orders and gathering information to all the different units required a large number of messengers to come and go from the command post. It wouldn't be odd for the enemies to pick up on that.

“That's plausible, I admit. Still, how could they have known that taking out this one place would collapse our whole chain of command? After all, there was supposed to be a robust counterintelligence net deployed in the area.”

“One of the messengers must have been captured and interrogated.”

“Don't you think we would have known? Also, don't try suggesting that they mounted an attack before it was possible to learn about losing an agent. You know best how much time it takes to prepare that amount of troops.”

Rion's headquarters had constantly monitored who went where and when. There had even been a system to report that a courier had reached his destination.

Anyone that went missing would be identified without a fail. Sure, it would take some time, but assembling a strike team the size that had hit the command post would have taken longer.

“...We lack evidence.”

All this left only a few possibilities remaining, one of those obvious. Which is why Sol raised the matter of proof.

“But we have an eyewitness. Lady Olivia, who gave information to your side, pray tell?”

“I-I do not know.”

Olivia replied to the sudden question reflexively. And that caused her to blunder. Admitting to not knowing the traitor’s identity confirmed said traitor’s existence. Which was exactly why Rion asked her out of the blue like this.

To be fair though, even if she denied the traitor’s existence, Rion would follow the clues and eventually find the truth. The end result would not differ.

“...What is your plan?”

Sol had accepted the traitor hypothesis. His question was a sign of agreement and also worry that Rion’s plan could bring great chaos to the kingdom.

“There’s nothing to do without knowing the identity. I have my suspects, but there might be a mastermind behind them.”

“So? I know you will not sit idle and do nothing.”

“Those I suspect are out of my reach, so I’ll have someone that can get to them do the work. This is why I need the Princess.”

“...Can you not do anything that could plunge the kingdom into–”

“You really understand nothing, don’t you?”

Rion interrupted Sol’s mid-sentence looking astounded.

“I have acknowledged the existence of the traitor.”

“That’s unimportant. You are one of those betrayed. And not just you. Everyone here, the whole army, almost died because of that treachery. Our villain is someone who doesn’t mind tens of thousands of people dying when it suits him. And you want to return to a city where such a person holds power?”

“I...”

Sol understood he had erred again. He let himself be exploited so that Rion could indirectly address the army around them.

The seeds of distrust would undoubtedly spread like wildfire affecting every single soldier of the ninety-thousand-strong army of the Gran Flamm Kingdom.

“What I aim to do will purge the traitors from the capital. Do you have anything against this?”

“...Nothing.”

Purging of traitors was an excuse frequently employed by rebels. However, that exact frequency showed its effectiveness. An effectiveness Rion just demonstrated. For now, a Frey Rebellion was just a vague threat on the horizon, but Sol was certain that were someone seriously try to impede Rion’s aims, the youth wouldn’t hesitate from making it a reality.

He feared that future so much, he decided against pushing the youth further right now.

“Fantastic. Let’s return to Bandeaux immediately. It would be a problem if Merica decided to try something funny while we are idling here. I don’t want to fight past this point.”

Many took these words as a message for them, which was intended. The side event had thus concluded. The battle was over.

But another conflict was brewing on the horizon.

“It would be good if Lady Olivia made sure not fall for him.”

“Eh?”

Olivia was bewildered Ariel’s cryptic sentence.

“Do not fall in love with my husband. Can the Princess do that?”

“...He is considerably younger than me, is he not?”

Princess Olivia was already well over twenty and past the prime marriageable years. She was allowed to remain single due to her value as a military leader.

“Rion had already slept with women at the age of ten.”

“Eh?”

“Those women were as old, if not older than Lady Olivia. Some of them were rather mature, in fact. Compared to those days, my husband is much older.”

“...”

Ariel’s words were quite a blow to the Princess. She was not just royalty, she was also unsullied.

“...In the end, Lady Olivia is just a child, a most dangerous kind of person.”

Ariel spoke that last sentence with Charlotte in her thoughts. When women chased Rion proactively, he might establish some sort of relationship with them, but he would never fall in love. But conversely, those innocent ones with an idealistic vision of love that desired only feelings were a danger. A very real danger as far as Ariel was concerned.

“...I am sure I shall be fine.”

“...I hope that is so.”

This, of course, was not the looming conflict mentioned earlier. This was just Ariel being jealous.

# Chapter 70

## Viscount Frey's Rebellion

Olivia Clockford, the Second Princess of the Kingdom of Merica, had become a prisoner of war. But out of all the possible sources, the one that the Kingdom of Gran Flamm learned about this fact from was Olivia's mother country itself. Specifically, those were one of the very first words Merican envoy uttered when he arrived to conduct post-war negotiations.

The person responsible for the process on the Gran Flamm side blundered heavily by showing his confusion at the unexpected situation. This betrayed that nobody in the capital had the tiniest clue about what had happened.

Princess Olivia, without a doubt, had been taken captive, but the opposing negotiators clearly knew nothing of this. It was Merican envoy's turn to be briefly confused, but soon, based on this unexpected piece of news, he had suspended the talks and returned home giving "necessity of investigating further" as the excuse.

The negotiation process, that was supposed to start off with Merica at a huge disadvantage, stalled in its infancy. The Merican side wished to exploit the situation, but that required figuring out Olivia's whereabouts — a problem that resolved itself quickly and effortlessly.

The treacherous Kingdom of Orcus, showing no sense of decency or honor, dispatched an envoy to their erstwhile allies. The Mericans initially expected selfish pleas for forgiveness and succor, but were instead offered information on the Princess' location and a tantalizing prospect of her unconditional return.

All that was met with much skepticism at first, but all doubts were dispelled by Olivia's handwritten letter. Merica knew what it needed to know, it began to act towards the Princess' release.

Those developments filtered to Grann Flam with a bit of delay, but, once that happened, all eyes turned to Bandeaux.

"So Princess Olivia of Merica was captured? That's quite a feat."

Said Rion, the person who happened to achieve that feat.

“The magnitude of the achievement is of secondary importance. His Majesty was led to believe that her highness Olivia is being held at your residence, sir Viscount, and tasked me with verifying the veracity of that information.”

And this was said by the royal envoy. His objective was to find out the truth behind the information Gran Flamm obtained from Merica during the aborted negotiations.

“At my residence? Are you sure no sort of mistake has been made?”

“That is the news that reached the palace, sir Viscount. Moreover.....”

The envoy’s gaze wandered towards the warrior-maid standing at Ariel’s side. By a curious coincidence, the girl’s characteristics and what the envoy had been told of Olivia matched perfectly.

The Princess was described, among other features, as a tall woman with silver hair and blue eyes. She was supposed to be a beauty in her own right. And, well, that maid carried herself with an elegance not usually seen in common staff.

“Lord Frey, may I ask who that lady is?”

“Eh? Is there something wrong with that warrior-maid?”

“Warrior-maid?”

This was a role unknown outside Bandeaux. The phrase itself was coined by Venus to describe the clan girls following Ariel into battle.

“Warrior-maids are women who take care of the needs and security of my wife.”

“I see. Who may that lady be, then?”

“A warrior-maid, obviously?”

“...Yes, we have established that already. May I enquire when did you take her into your employ?”

“Quite recently, actually. She displayed a rare talent for military matters, despite being

of the fairer sex, and we hired her as an instructor for other warrior-maids.”

Which meant the girl also possessed the Princess’ gift for war.

“...Now I am curious, where did she come from?”

“Originally? Kingdom of Merica, I think?”

“Merica!?”

The country of origin was a match too.

“Isn’t that right? Miss Olivia?”

“W-What!?”

And even the name... Clearly, it was Olivia herself.

“Dear guest, is anything wrong?”

“Sir Viscount, how can you ask? Is that not her highness Olivia in person?”

“A princess seeking employment as a maid? Isn’t that just preposterous?”

“Have you not called her “Miss Olivia” just now?”

“Ah, you’re right, they do have the same name, don’t they? What a surprising coincidence.”

“I implore your lordship to not play the fool! Such coincidences never happen!”

Of course not. As the messenger had said, Rion was just playing the fool.

“Well, one certainly happened here. Would you please listen to my explanation and think about it carefully?”

Rion showed no sign of faltering in front of the envoy’s angry outburst and replied in a calm tone.

“Certainly, your lordship.”

“If this really was Princess Olivia, why would I even attempt such a ploy? If I were to try hiding the Princess, I would not address her with her name. In fact, I wouldn’t even bring her here. Be assured that if her highness Olivia were to fall into my hands, I would take her to the capital post-haste instead of making her play a maid.”

“That... However...”

Rion’s explanation was perfectly reasonable, but the envoy couldn’t just accept it unchallenged.

“Moreover, I am fully satisfied by the marriage with Ariel, my dearest wife. The thought of taking a concubine never crossed my mind. Even if a beauty, like the Princess is rumored to be, were to fall into my hands, I would not be interested.”

“...Sir Viscount, I do not doubt that, but—”

“Heavens! What can I say to make you believe me?”

Rion looked like he started to tire of the conversation. The envoy had no answer, but with the situation as it was, he could neither conclusively confirm or deny Olivia’s presence in Camargue to his superiors.

“...I fear your lordship will have to make a journey to the capital to explain this in person.”

So he figured the best solution will be to push the problem on Rion. Once Viscount Frey made an explanation in person, even if it proved to be a lie, it would not be the envoy’s problem.

“I will have to refuse.”

However, Rion refused out of hand.

“May I ask why? Your lordship bears the responsibility of reporting important matters.”

“And I will do so in due time. I have just returned from the war. Having faced death at every turn, my body is weary and not ready for long journeys.”

“When can the palace expect Viscount Frey?”

“Hard to say. For a long while now I have been busy with a duty that rightfully wasn’t mine leaving my territory without proper supervision. There’s a lot of piled up, overdue matters I have to take care of first. Sorting that out will take some time, once I’m rested, of course.”

Rion managed to make his answer sound both condescending and bored of the trivia, while at the same time adding yet another reason why he couldn’t possibly go.

The envoy had no authority to accept any excuses, though.

“While sir Viscount’s arguments are sound, I am not the person they should be addressed to.”

And he admitted that honestly.

“Speaking of weariness, isn’t sir tired from his long journey too?”

Rion was confident he had said enough and, suddenly, changed the subject.

“Well, I will not deny...”

“Then, I insist sir gives some rest to your body and soul. And luckily, there are plenty of establishments in town that can be of assistance in this.”

“...But.”

Even as the envoy said that, his resolve was already shaken. He had heard the rumors about Camargue’s pleasure quarter and he was already planning a visit given a chance.

“Your companions are welcome to go too, of course. Hmm... Now that I think about it, reservations might be in order. Worry not, I will handle the details.”

“Is that so... Ah, however...”

“Oh, do not worry about the cost. The castle is unable to accommodate sir properly, so do treat this as substitute lodgings. I have no ulterior motives.”

“Oh, if that’s the case, I guess I will have to accept.”

Since there was no cost, and Rion stated publicly he expected no favors in return, the

envoy stopped trying to resist.

“Well then, let’s have someone guide you. Can someone please arrange lodging for sir envoy’s party and guide them there?”

“At once, Lord.”

With this, the day’s negotiations came to a conclusion. But Rion didn’t plan to do away with the subject for just today, he wanted to suspend them entirely for the time being. In the meantime, the envoy would spend the days at the inn enjoying a specially prepared hospitality package. He would be unlikely to complain.

“...What are you trying to do?”

Olivia asked Rion once the Crown’s emissary withdrew. She had been told nothing, just been requested to stand there in a warrior-maid uniform.

“I’m buying time. The bargaining chips are not ready yet.”

“This is not what I ask about. Why did you give them a hint that I am actually Olivia?”

“Ah, that. I need to make them understand that you’re here. It would be bad if the messenger was stupid enough to start believing otherwise”

“...To what end?”

Being, for the first time, faced with how Rion tended to explain things, Olivia struggled. He wasn’t the kind to lay out his plans clearly without some prodding.

“I’m going to receive a firm invitation to the capital, I guess.”

“And?”

“It will become one more issue to negotiate. Not that I actually plan on making demands.”

He had no intention of pushing for anyone to be killed or stripped of their status. The contents of the negotiations were certain to leak to his targets and cornered humans were both dangerous and unpredictable. Rion wanted the Kingdom to act of its own volition and not under duress.

“I understand... nothing. Do you really plan to continue opposing your country? You may be a very strong fighter, but you just do not have the numbers.”

“I have no desire to escalate this to an armed conflict. If that was my intention, I wouldn’t hand over the army I led.”

Nearly all of the soldiers and knights of the Kingdom that saw combat under Rion in Merica had returned to the capital already. Only those that really didn’t want to leave remained behind. Sol was one of them, but he had stayed to stop Rion if the youth were to go on a rampage.

“How do you plan to do it?”

“With your help, of course. I have a task for Princess Olivia now, shall we proceed to fitting the dress?”

“Eh?”

Olivia still remembered what Ariel had said back then on the battlefield. She was now rather unreasonably wary of this boy that had slept with numerous women in the past.

“...Do not misunderstand, please. New dress is just to demonstrate that you’re being treated well. I can arrange for a set of armor if you’d rather have that.”

“Ah. In that case I’d rather have something like what you wear now.”

“A knight uniform? Is that something you usually wear?”

Rion always had, of course. Ever since the day he had been given the option when serving Vincent.

“The skirts do not agree with me”

“Very well, I’ll arrange to have one made. Some measurements will be required, please bear with that.”

“Certainly. But who will it be shown to”

“Are you really that confused? I expect an imminent arrival of your father’s envoy, he should be within the borders of the territory now, in fact. And, obviously, he will

demand your immediate return.”

“...A demand you will reject.”

Allowing Olivia to return to Merica, would strip his stand against Gran Flamm of all its meaning. In the end, Olivia was no wiser about Rion’s plans than when she had started the conversation.

“Oh, I will agree, eventually. As long as necessary conditions are met.”

“What kind of conditions?”

“Is diplomacy something you’re usually involved in too?”

“...No, not really.”

“I’ll make an exception for you just this once. I want a rank in your kingdom, and a higher one than Viscount.”

“...Let me give you a piece of advice in gratitude. That can only happen if you survive.”

Rion could demand, and be promised, anything he wanted. But once Olivia was returned, there would be no reason to honor those obligations and he would likely die as soon as he tried to set foot on Merican soil.

“I thought so as well. I guess it’s necessary for me to remain as the lord of Bandeaux in addition to the demands I listed previously. “

“...Are you serious?”

Becoming one of Merican nobles while remaining as the feudal lord of Bandeaux... That was tantamount to handing over the territory to Merica. If that were to happen, their sphere of influence would grow vastly and Rion would not only stop being a target, he would become indispensable. Nobody else would be able to protect those gains.

“Who knows what will happen? After all, I am yet to start the talks with either country.”

“I guess...”

Olivia still couldn't figure out what Rion wanted, but she was now adamant she wanted him in her country. She had realized his talents are not limited to war.

As a member of a royal clan, she valued him higher now than Bandeaux itself.

Some time later, as Rion had expected, Merica's envoy had indeed entered Camargue. And Rion welcomed his party lavishly.

This was not because he was happy to see them, but to let Gran Flamm's emissary know the competition was here. This raised more chaos and confusion at the royal court. Conducting independent diplomacy with an enemy nation carried pretty obvious implications.

Viscount Rion Frey, the hero of the Kingdom, had rebelled. And the whole country was shaken to the core.



Arnold entered the room slamming the door violently behind him. This alone was enough for Charlotte and the Clan Heads to figure out the result of his efforts.

The Prince unceremoniously grabbed a chair, sat down, and sighed. Deeply.

"The idea was rejected."

"As we guessed it would, highness."

It was obvious to Charlotte from the beginning. Trying to send the Clan Heads to negotiate with Rion was doomed to get nowhere, nobody would agree to let a potential enemy have his valuable subordinates back.

"Rion's rebellion is assumed to be a fact, even though there is no supporting evidence."

Rion had sent back the soldiers he had been leading. He was not mobilizing his territorial forces. He even accepted the King's envoy who was apparently on the way back to the capital right now.

"But there is no evidence to prove he remains loyal either."

"Which is exactly why I recommended dispatching people Rion trusts to ascertain his

motives.”

“They remain his subordinates, highness. As expected, I should be the one to go. He may not trust me, but I do think he will talk to me.”

“Impossible. House Fatillas will never consent. Windhills are the only great family that does not support launching a punitive campaign in Bandeaux at the moment.”

“That is an impressive number of enemies for Rion to have.”

Rion didn’t fear his enemies. That was a strong point of his, but it could also be a weakness. Like now, when all those who had refrained from criticizing the King’s trust of Viscount Frey in the past suddenly started attacking Rion all at once.

“That is how impressively strong he has become. Many important people fear him now and they relish the chance to put him down. And many people of lesser status sympathize with him in turn. It is a classic confrontation of those with vested interests in status quo and those desiring change.”

“A confrontation in which Rion’s supporters lack power.”

“Ah, but they do not. And that is a problem.”

“...What is highness talking about?”

“There are officials pointing out that the rebellion can spill beyond the borders of Bandeaux and spread to the entire country. Even in the capital, it is possible to find common citizenry ready and willing to side with Rion and criticize the Kingdom.”

The general public was a very sentimental beast. In the past, it had been made aware of Rion’s and Ariel’s leading roles in the tragedy of the couple’s own life. It had watched, through rumor, gossip, and bard’s song as those two had found a semblance of happiness. It was sympathetic. And now it thought it was seeing the Crown try to take it all from them again. It was not a very logical point of view, but the potential explosion would be no less fearsome for that lack of logic.

“I do not wish for that. If Rion actually attempted a rebellion, he could succeed, couldn’t he?”

“Do not say that, even in jest. Even I was shaken when I heard this idea for the first

time. I actually wondered if this was not a long-term plan of his.”

“Begging your pardon, highness. That is not possible.”

“Hmm?”

Kiel was the one to interject. This topic could not be ignored even if it actually was a joke shared between Charlotte and Arnold.

“If the current situation develops into an armed conflict, the losses on both sides would be enormous regardless of the outcome. I do not deny that Lord Frey has little love in his heart for this Kingdom, but he would never let bystanders get entangled in whatever plan he decided to pursue.”

“...That... rings true. Accept my apologies.”

“I should be the one apologizing, highness. I have stepped out of line just now.”

Kiel’s status wouldn’t even normally allow him to share a table with Arnold, so interfering in Prince’s conversation was more than presumptuous. The royal didn’t care much for that, but his personal guard was here too and the protocol had to be at least paid lip service to.

“Let’s go back to the main subject. I have been thinking for a while just what is Rion trying to achieve, with little of note to show for the effort. So I decided to interview the returning soldiers.”

Arnold was being very careful to appear to be speaking to Charlotte, but in reality, he wanted Kiel and the others to hear this. Unfortunately for the young lady, this was exactly why she was at the table today.

“What did you discover, highness?”

“The mater is delicate, do make sure to keep it a secret.”

“Of course.”

“Somebody betrayed us.”

“...Eh?”

“At the very least, Rion appears to think so. He has doubts about why was his command post discovered and how did the enemy learn it was a key target.”

“...Intriguing questions indeed, highness.”

“Lambert, have you learned anything?”

“I have, my Lord Prince.”

The man, called Lambert Scythe, was a member of the Royal Guard and the Crown Prince’s personal guardian. He stepped forward from behind Arnold and began to explain.

“My Lords, Lady. Allow me first to explain how I have arrived at my conclusion. I was tasked with preparing a detailed chronological report of the events of the war against Merica. That required not only a careful lecture of the written accounts, but also face-to-face interviews with the soldiers that returned from the front.”

“I see. What did you find?”

“The written accounts do not match what the soldiers say, my Lord Prince.”

“...How do they differ?”

Up to this point, everything that Lambert said matched Arnold’s expectations. The Prince also had become aware of the irregularities and that had been what had prompted him to have his Royal Guard investigate. The only important unknown remaining was what did the written and oral accounts of the war disagree on.

“In the exact order of two events — the assault on Viscount’s Frey command post and the Merican army’s about-face to attack towards the south.”

“The command post was attacked first, I presume.”

“If the accounts of soldiers are to be believed, my Lord Prince.”

Lambert did not look upon Rion kindly, he treated the young Viscount’s hostility towards the Prince as unforgivable. Nevertheless, he could be trusted to investigate thoroughly and impartially.

“If the soldiers do not lie, and I fail to see why they would, the written reports from the war have been doctored. They state clearly that Merican army turned south first and then found the command post by accident second. This is not a benign case of an accidentally messed up chronology.”

The Crown Prince Arnold was very explicit in what he was telling Charlotte, and, “coincidentally”, the Clan Heads.

“Does this mean that Rion was sold out to the Kingdom of Merica, highness?”

“That is a justified point of view. And, in my opinion, the main reason behind his actions.”

“So if we find and catch the perpetrator...”

“The matter is more complicated than it looks. The documents are co-signed by the Marshall of the Crown and the Head of the Intelligence Bureau, implicating both of them in the betrayal. At the very least, we are talking about dismantling the management of both the Kingdom’s spy network and its armed forces. The effects will be hard to overstate.”

“...I see, but that is what Rion wants, isn’t it. If fear of consequences will stop you from grappling with this problem, then you will have to face a more serious one. Thank you very much, highness. I understand at last.”

If those two very important people were actually traitors, more conspirators were almost guaranteed. The high echelons of Crown Army, a considerable number of high-ranked Intelligence Bureau operatives... Maybe even whole organizations if passive collaborators were to be included.

Not only would the affected branches of government be thrown into chaos, they would also lose trust and respect of the citizens. Exposing them would have to be handled very, very carefully.

However, were Rion to place Bandeaux under Merican reign, his fief would be shielded from the worst after-effects. The situation could yet develop into an existential crisis for the Kingdom.

“Yes, we do know his reasons. But I think he is overdoing things a bit. How exactly does he plan to defuse all this when he gets what he wants?”

“Asking the person himself is likely the fastest way to know, highness.”

“...So in the end, we are back to that, eh?”

Even though things were clearer for them now, they still ended up back where they had started from. And somehow, nobody found the idea of asking the person behind this mess for more details in any way strange.

# Chapter 71

## Those Who Were Moving Towards Conclusion

At this point, with rumors spread far and wide, Rion became the center of attention of not just the Gran Flamm Kingdom, but even the surrounding countries. After all, he was the person who had single-handedly invaded the Kingdom of Merica, during the most recent war, and earned the huge achievement of capturing Princess Olivia, the War Goddess, in the process. And if that alone was not enough, he rebelled against his country once he returned from the battle

One could only wonder what his next move would be. So, for all the countries concerned, whether they were directly involved or not, he was a subject of great interest. Depending on his actions, the situation on the continent could change massively.

However, unlike his key status in the world implied, the person himself was currently absentmindedly watching things outside his window.

“Do you feel more important when looking at people from up high?”

Ariel asked a question from somewhere behind him.

“Do you, Ari?”

“Thoughts of that nature passed through my mind when I was a child.”

Ariel spoke about the fact that looking at people from a high place could give an impression that all of them belonged to the watcher, that they were creatures of the watcher’s world. She had felt something similar, but it had been akin to a child watching over its toys, without a lust for power.

“Is that so... I don’t feel anything like that. Watching those people go about their life makes me... happy.”

Rion said this while continuing to watch the world outside. Ariel softly hugged his back. She was just happy about his answer.

“...Ari?”

“You have to treasure those feelings. Do not force yourself to hate people.”

Ariel could see through him without difficulty. Many people had died as a result of the war with Merica. Rion couldn't shake the feeling that it might have been his fault. That his heterochromia did indeed bring about disasters and that had been just the of those.

“...Those around me suffer ill fate, always and without fault. Merican envoy had a slip of tongue just the other day. Do you know how they call me? A child that brings calamity.”

“You saved so many people. If you truly bring calamity, it is only on your enemies.”

“It would be nice if that were to be true.”

“It is true. Thanks to you, the life in Bandeaux became better. Not a single person here would call you as those Mericans did.”

“Nevertheless, in the end, I got even the citizens of this land involved in this mess.”

This time, the situation has escalated too much. Rion felt that were he to fail, a war was more likely than not. And that would turn all his achievements here to nothing.

“You have involved nobody yet. We still have peace.”

“If things stay as they are, the Kingdom might act rashly out of impatience.”

“But you know how to prevent that, right?”

“...We will die if I fail. And our pledge of vengeance would remain unfulfilled.”

He could see a way of exploiting the current state of things for the sake of their revenge. The strength of Merica could be borrowed to ruin Gran Flamm completely. The chance of success was high and this made the opportunity as good as they came. Yet going down that path would turn the people of his fief into collateral damage.

Rion couldn't bear doing such a thing, and the dilemma was gnawing at him.

“It will be for the sake of those that we treasure. For that, it will be fine to abandon the quest for vengeance.”

“Impossible, I have to kill Lord Vincent’s enemies. For my sake, and for yours, Ari.”

“...Rion is mistaken.”

“Mistaken, how?”

“For me, Rion is more important than older brother ever was. I prioritized my feelings for Rion, even though I knew older brother might end up indicted as a result. Because of my desire, I also ended up being brother’s enemy.”

Ariel had openly acknowledged her chastisements of Maria, and that small misstep was spun into high treason. But she had been aware of that possibility before she had admitted her part. Ariel and Vincent had both realized that the Investigation Bureau had been using the two of them in order to get to the commoner students.

However, Ariel hadn’t shouldered all those sins just to save those lowborn. She had also expected that she would cease to be Arnold’s fiancée as a result and might end up free to go with Rion.

“...Just like I am one for letting Lord Vincent die. Exactly why I have to make up for it.”

Even after learning of Ariel’s impure motives, Rion would not condemn her for them. He might be lamenting his failure of saving Vincent, but he was still happy about being able to marry Ariel. He had also fulfilled his desires through his lord’s death.

“I wonder, would it not be nicer if you made up for that by saving people instead?”

“Ari.”

“Just do what you really want, my husband. I do not mind abandoning the quest for vengeance if that will save people we both cherish. I do not mind throwing my life away for that.”

“...I want you to live. Above all else.”

“Rion, you are the world to me. If I lose my world, lose you, I cannot continue living. We swore to each other, if we are going to die, we shall do it together.”

“...Alright.”

Rion turned around and embraced his wife. Their faces naturally moved close to each other, their lips... went nowhere because Rion asked a question.

“...Do you need something?”

The presence that Rion felt ruined the special mood. The person questioned reluctantly emerged from the shadows of the doorway.

“...Nothing important, in hindsight.”

“So why are you here? Peeping is quite a bad hobby, you know.”

“...Can I ask one thing?”

Sol didn't rise Rion's provocation and just calmly replied with a question.

“What about?”

“What are you planning to do from now on?”

“...I will probably go to the capital. I hoped for that guy's experience to count for something, but as expected there's no <fantasy> brain in his head.”

“Fa—Fa, what?”

“Ah, forget it. Anyhow, the capital could not figure out the truth. And since they failed, I'll have to tell them myself.”

“If you go to the capital, you'll be killed.”

“You were eavesdropping, right? I don't fear death. And my wife approves.”

“...Is that so. Alright.”

Having heard Rion's reply, Sol left the room in a hurry. His chest felt too heavy, he couldn't continue the conversation anymore.

He had searched for Rion to admonish him for excessive recklessness in handling the

situation, and had come here with that in mind. And then he had accidentally heard an unexpected conversation.

Rion had resolved himself to sacrifice his life in order to save other people. Hearing this, Sol realized just how foolish he had been. He should've noticed that side of him long ago. That although his words may say the opposite, Rion had been acting with his people in mind all this time.

Sol couldn't accept that he had mistaken Rion's real intention for something else. Now, unable to serve Rion, even as the youngster prepared himself to save others, he loathed himself.

Sol finally came to terms with the fact that he felt the same the Bandeaux leaders did. He wanted to be acknowledged by Rion, but could only curse his own powerlessness in that regard.



Far away from the Bandeaux, in the capital, there was another person seeking acknowledgment from Rion. It was the Crown Prince, Arnold. But, of course, the precise nature of this desire differed from that shared by the others. He, a future king of this land, wanted to be acknowledged by Rion as his lord.

Arnold himself wasn't all that confident that he would be able to fulfill this dream. But he knew he wouldn't be able to reach his goal by doing nothing. So, currently, had been working hard to dispel the notion that Rion had rebelled.

"We must send our army right away. My position on this will not change."

"Even though we lack sufficient information? If we do such a thing, the trust of other landed nobles in the Crown would be shaken."

"No matter how you think about it, highness, there is no doubt that Viscount Frey rebelled."

"Is there not? On what evidence? There are no observable efforts to fortify his territory. No attempts to turn away our envoys. Even the merchants are free to come and go from the territory as they please, are they not? The only people making a noise about a "rebellion" are those residing in this castle."

“Those merchants came from the Kingdom of Merica. Not a single merchant of our country has taken a step into that territory since this matter started.”

“I am sure the fact we, unlike Merica, prohibit our merchants from going there has nothing to do with the fact. Incidentally, our merchants are rather worried. In the current situation, only their foreign competition profits from trade through Bandeaux. Some of the trading houses actually wonder who the real ally of Merica is.”

“Preposterous! What is your highness saying?”

“Are you not even aware of this? Is our Intelligence Bureau really in good shape?”

The Crown Prince was attacking the head of Intelligence Bureau, James, using Rion’s way of provoking his opponents. He had already lost count of how many times had this kind of exchange taken place. All the recent conferences followed the same script — James was pushing for military intervention and Arnold opposed any such move.

Thus far, the Crown Prince was winning the argument. The traffic between Bandeaux and the rest of the kingdom, that had stopped for a moment after the rumors of rebellion, had already recovered. According to the statements of the travelers, there was no war tension in Bandeaux at all. Some of them were openly wondering just what the kingdom was making all this fuss about.

This peaceful image was being spread on purpose, of course. Rion was moving his resources in order to control the situation. Resist specialized not only in information gathering, but also in its dissemination, and control.

“You highness.”

The Crown Marshall intervened in the conversation at this point.

“...Yes, Lord Marshall?”

Arnold started to feel nervous. The fact that Marshall of the Crown picked this moment to join the conversation raised the possibility that he was conspiring with James after all. As far as the Prince was concerned, this was the worst case scenario.

“If Viscount Frey is a loyal subject of this kingdom, why does he refuse to come to capital? Why is he sheltering captured Merican princess in his lands?”

“Refuses? I have not heard him refuse. I heard him ask to be given time to take care of his duties as a feudal lord.”

“Am I really supposed to believe that, highness?”

“Tell me, Marshall, why would you not? Is it not true that he had been fighting a battle that in normal circumstances, should never be his concern? Did he not achieve all he was asked for, and more? Did he not distinguish himself beyond compare in the process? There is no reason to ever doubt his loyalty towards the Crown.”

No one present could object to this. Especially the Marshall, who commanded the Army.

“...What about the matter of Princess Olivia, highness?”

“Honestly, I thought it strange too and had it thoroughly investigated. And to my great surprise, while some soldiers did confirm that Viscount Frey captured the Princess, other denied that this ever happened. Very odd. What is happening to our army, Lord Marshall?”

What Arnold said was true. Some of the soldiers felt indebted to Rion and were trying to cover up for him by giving false testimonies.

Arnold was not blind to the fact and decided to use that discrepancy to his own advantage.

“The kingdom of Merica told us that he took her as a prisoner. This makes it pretty certain that the princess was captured, does it not, highness?”

“Why did they say nothing more on the subject, then? Or are there negotiations underway I know nothing about?”

No such negotiations were taking place and Arnold was certain of that.

“Would they not be conducted at Bandeaux, highness?”

“An assumption based on assumption that cousin Olivia is there. And it does not answer my question.”

The Crown Prince, after being on a receiving end of a barrage of questions, went on

the offensive. The Crown Marshall was now being cornered by Arnold.

“...If Merica takes Bandeaux, whatever we try to do will come too late.”

“And therefore, in order not to let that happen, we should refrain from rash actions that would undermine Viscount Frey’s loyalty to the kingdom, should we not?”

“He may have already betrayed us.”

“Yet another guess, Marshall. We are getting nowhere like this. But since you are so insistent, do answer one question. Do you think you can win that war?”

“Highness?”

“When you set out against Viscount Frey, are you fully confident that you will win?”

“...I do not understand?”

The Marshall did not expect Arnold to ask such a question and he could find no immediate answer. And the Prince picked this moment to land the finishing blow.

“Just some stray thoughts, my Lord Marshall. Sending the troops involved in the recent war seems ill-advised, Viscount Frey saved their lives, after all. They are unlikely to have sufficient morale and making them do such a thing seems... wrong.”

“...That man—”

The Crown Marshall thought he knew why Rion had returned the troops that had survived invading Merica. He suspected it was an attempt to break the kingdom’s army from the inside. He was wrong, of course. From the beginning, Rion never had the intention to fight Gran Flamm. And even if he did, he would still let those soldiers return home. Keeping an army of dubious loyalty in one’s backyard was a foolish endeavor.

Crown Marshall was visibly angered by Arnold’s words, and that had shaken the participants of the conference. A lot of them had been supportive of military intervention thus far, but chiefly because they feared Rion’s new strength. Hearing the Crown Prince question the odds of victory made them even more anxious.

And this started to change people’s minds. This was a result of what Arnold’s

opponents forgot about, that he had been once called wise. And not entirely without reason.

The Prince always had in him the power to sway opinion with his words. And so it proved here, even if resolving the whole situation fully was an impossible task even for him.

“So in the end, we still need to talk with Viscount Frey.”

The Knight Commander, thus far observing the proceedings in silence, joined the discussion at last.

“We do, sir Frederick. Therefore I shall head to Bandeaux myself.”

““““Wha-!!”“““

Arnold’s statement agitated the room. Everyone knew that the Prince’s relationship with Viscount Frey was far from good. Many of them were thinking that the Viscount’s actions in this incident were fueled by his grudge over the death of Vincent Woodville. And, to those people, Arnold going to Bandeaux was exactly like a moth flying into the flame.

“This incident is not serious enough to require your highness to go in person. Let me take on the duty instead.”

“You, sir Frederick?”

This time it was the Prince’s turn to be surprised.

“There will be no problems if I am absent from the capital for a prolonged period of time to hold talks with the Viscount. I am pretty much the ideal candidate for the task.”

Prince Arnold might’ve been surprised but what Frederick had said was correct. And at least half of the conference agreed with that too.

“In that case, Lord Commander, may we burden you with this duty?”

“It shall be done, Majesty.”

The King, who had kept his silence all this time, decided to close the subject with this.

But then again, he and Frederick had decided on this course of action long ago.

“Then, that settles the matters for today. Good work, everyone.”

“““We thank your majesty!”“““

There were still topics warranting discussion. However, now that the king had adjourned the meeting, they would be set aside for now.

“Arnold, stay for a moment longer. We have things to discuss.”

“...Yes, father.”

The Prince remain seated as ordered. The Knight Commander also remained in place, not moving from where he was. The King did not start speaking until all others left the room, the matters he wished to discuss were of private nature.

“How much do you know?”

“...About the war with Merica, father?”

“I see, so you do know. Tell me what you think happened.”

“I believe there are people who leaked confidential information to our enemies during the war. I now suspect both the Intelligence Bureau Head and the Crown Marshal.”

“Why do you think so?”

The king showed no signs of surprise. He had the same suspicions.

“I investigated the progress of the war, and the written reports were untrue. Since they co-signed those documents, I began to doubt them both.”

“Mhm. Why did you think of investigating in the first place?”

“At first, it was merely because of my impression of Rion as a person. I do not believe him to be the type who would entangle bystanders in private matters. I was so confident of this impression that I thought he would have a different reason for doing what he has done. The only thing that came to mind was the most recent event, the war with Merica Kingdom. Something must have happened during that time.”

“I see. You did well. Nevertheless...”

“...Is there a problem, father?”

“How did you plan to manage the fallout? The involved people are unlikely to be limited to the Crown Marshal and Intelligence Bureau Head, right?”

“That is true, father. However, I believe we must dispose of the two as fast as we can regardless. After that, we will manage somehow.”

“Somehow? You kept your pursuit of those two with such a reckless attitude?”

“I am not reckless, father. I have a simple, guaranteed to work method of handling the aftermath.”

“...Do you now? What would it be?”

The King couldn't think of any such method despite trying hard. He was rather surprised that Arnold came up with an ingenious idea like that.

“We shall leave it to Rion, father. Rion is capable of managing both the Army and the Intelligence Bureau. After all, he already has experience in managing these two organizations.”

“...This... is the simple, guaranteed to work idea of yours?”

The King was dumbfounded by this unexpected answer. The Knight Commander at his side was as surprised. But Frederick was also somewhat happy.

“Think about it father. Rion would certainly be able to deal with any problems, and leaving it to him makes it simple.”

“...I did not expect to hear such an answer coming from you.”

“Really?”

“But, well... I guess you're right. In the end, we may end up having to do just that. But we need to talk with the man first.”

“That is true.”

The Knight Commander left for Bandeaux on the same day. After all, it had been a course of action agreed with the King some time ago and all the preparation had been done.

The shocking incident, known in the future as the Bandeaux Rebellion, was about to reach its conclusion. At that point in time, nobody thought that it would bring another mayhem to the kingdom.

# Chapter 72

## The Hidden Truth

There was a conference being held inside the Camargue castle, and the Knight Commander barged his way in as soon as he arrived. He was in such a rush that he didn't even have time to catch a breather, but he did not complain, he was the person who wanted to put things in order the most.

He couldn't fail to notice that this conference was a rather private affair and the only attendees he knew personally were Rion, Ariel, and Sol.

"You took your time getting here, old man."

And those were the first words the host directed at him.

"My journey was anything but slow, actually. I arrived faster than planned."

Frederick had traveled to Camargue in a hurry, indeed. And while his journey hadn't quite taken half the usual time required to cross the distance, it had been pretty close to that – off by a mere handful of days.

"What I meant was that the decision to come here itself was late."

"...That is on you due to making your motives so unclear."

"I'm reflecting on that. I might have overestimated you a bit. I thought you'd be able to understand without us making a move."

"As if. Even now, I still do not get it. Why did you have to push the situation to such a grave point?"

All Frederick could see Rion demand was a removal of the leadership of the compromised organizations. The Knight Commander was ready to undertake all necessary steps for this as soon as Rion faced the King with such a request. The boy has proved himself to be reliable enough to make such an outcome possible.

“...I see. You really do not understand it at all.”

“As I said.”

“You don’t understand more than you think. How to manage the situation is secondary to why have we ended here in the first place. Why do you think I’ve done all this?”

“...Because the governing elites of the kingdom betrayed you, right?”

From the way Rion asked, Frederick already knew that he had been mistaken. However, he couldn’t figure out how and to what extent.

“Oh, there are traitors, indeed. But do you know who did they really betray?”

“...Are you saying they betrayed the king, not just you?”

The Knight Commander guessed that the plotters had schemed something that would benefit Merica in a big way.

“If it was just that, I wouldn’t have bothered.”

“Hey now?”

“Just so you know, before I explain, I have no solid evidence for my conjectures. Honestly, I’m not entirely convinced I’m correct either. Which is, perhaps, why my intentions lacked clarity to such an extent.”

“...Continue.”

A situation that could restrain Rion, preventing him from acting overtly. A very idea of such a thing shook Frederick to the core.

“Very well. But do listen to the end, even if what I say sounds unbelievable. I ask the same of you, Princess.”

“W-What!?”

The Knight Commander exclaimed in surprise hearing who Rion addressed.

“What are you so surprised about? Didn’t you already know that she was here?”

Rion was completely unfazed by that.

“Even if I did... Why must she be here?”

They were about to discuss internal affairs of the Kingdom of Gran Flamm. Frederick wasn't happy about doing this in the presence of a princess from another, hostile, country.

“You'll know soon enough. Where should we start... Ah, right, some self-introductions are in order.”

“Self-introductions, my dear host?”

“Isn't that needed, highness? Take this old man here, the Knight Commander of Gran Flamm kingdom, whose name is... completely unknown to me now that I think about it.”

“...Frederick Dawson, Commander of the Knightly Orders. While I have never expected that the two of us would meet in this kind of situation, it is nevertheless a pleasure to make your acquaintance, your royal highness.”

Even though he was muttering complaints under his breath, Frederick still stood up and introduced himself, properly greeting the Princess. His position demanded a certain level of decorum, after all.

“I am Olivia Clockford, Second Princess of the Kingdom of Merica. The man next to me is my royal knight, sir Yuri Stewart. It is a pleasure to meet you, Lord Dawson.”

“Having a chance to meet the famous Frederick Dawson is an honor. I am Yuri Stewart, my lord.”

Having been presented by Princess Olivia, Yuri had also introduced himself. He had come to Camargue after hearing that Rion had been accepting Merican envoys. He hadn't known he had been actively baited to show up in this manner.

“Those two are Mercury Blau and Venus Weiss. Personal guards of me and my wife respectively.”

“You have a personal guard?”

This was an interesting piece of news for the Knight Commander who had wanted to put Sol at Rion's side.

"I am a territory lord, after all. I can call them how I want, can't I?"

Rion mistook Frederick's reaction for as a rebuke for doing things that didn't fit his current social status.

"Without a doubt."

"Then stop complaining about how others run their affairs. Now, the introductions are made, let's get back to the main topic."

"...Let's."

It was true that he was in no position to complain about the inner workings of the Viscount House of Bandeaux. Furthermore, those two were personally acknowledged by Rion, there must have been something in them despite their young age.

He decided he would just investigate them later, the pressing issue of the day came first.

"So, traitors. We were talking about who and what was exactly being betrayed, right?"

"Correct."

"Let's establish something first. If I, and the soldiers under my command, failed to escape into the territory of the Merica Kingdom, what do you think would have happened to us?"

"...Escaped?"

"That's right, escaped. I wasn't really planning to invade Merica. I advanced in that direction only because there was no other escape route. That was also why I attacked Princess Olivia's headquarters — breaking the enemy's chain of command would make this maneuver easier."

"Did you not have pre-existing plans to invade Merica before that?"

"I did, but only to open an escape route if one was required. I am quite aware that I'm

pretty hated at the court, and people get killed all the time by friendly troops in the confusion of the battlefield.”

Well, they did in historical novels Ryou read, at least. This kind of meticulous preparation for even the smallest kind of risk was what made Rion so fearsome. In this situation, though, he was lying. Although it was true that he had been wary of the possible betrayal, the reason, why he had moved Bandeaux and Hashu Army as he had, had been to deny Orcus the chance to invade Bandeaux. He kept silent about this now because he didn’t want to inform Gran Flamm of Orcus’ betrayal.

“...Mhm.”

Frederick wasn’t entirely convinced, but there was no time for lengthy probing either.

“So, old man, what do you think would have happened if we failed to escape?”

“Breakdown of the chain of command and failure to execute orders would bring confusion to numerous units. Your troops would probably get exterminated by Merica.”

“And then? How would the rest of the interception force affect the situation?”

“Our army at the time also moved south in pursuit of the enemy. Merican forces would be attacked from behind, and suffer huge damage.”

“I’ve heard that the remaining forces gave chase. What I need to know is when exactly were they ordered to act. That will confirm or disprove my theory.”

“...When did they move?”

Frederick still didn’t understand the meaning of Rion’s question.

“How did our commanders know that the headquarters of Merican army fell? Our intelligence network should not be functioning properly at that point. And even if it was, would there be enough time prepare for a general attack south? Just from distance alone, our enemies should learn about Princess Olivia’s defeat faster than us.”

“That is true...”

Again, the inconsistencies in chronology reared their head. Without an accurate and

detailed information, it was difficult to have a good idea of even one's own army's situation. The order to counterattack seemed fine under normal circumstances, but even then, issuing it on the basis of such a suspicious piece of information like "the routed elements of your army have overrun enemy headquarters" was undoubtedly a mistake. And while the investigating Royal Guards had noticed the inconsistency in the order of events, they had treated it as part of the plot to attack Rion, thus failing to question things larger in scope.

"...Fine, you got me, cut to the chase already."

"I think the traitor's objective was simply to kill a lot of people. It didn't matter who died as long as they were human."

"...What?"

The Knight Commander finally connected the dots. But he really didn't want to believe his conclusions were right. But Olivia and the others, lacking certain crucial facts, had no clue what all that meant and the frustration started to show on their faces. This made Rion turn to the Princess with his next question.

"Highness, why do you think demons attack people?"

"That is just their nature, no? They are like the demonic beasts in this."

That was the only motive that Princess Olivia, a person originating from a place with no demon activity, could think of. And because she hadn't met Maria, the Princess was oblivious to both the existence of the devils and their goals.

"I would agree if people were accidental victims of demons wreaking havoc. But those demons target, humans on purpose. Or rather, there are being made to do so by the devils."

"What is a devil?"

"That is a good question I lack a good answer for. All I know is that their main objective seems to be revival of their god — the Demon God."

"...Is there really such a thing as the god of the devils?"

Olivia had never before heard about such a thing, not even in folk tales. The name

stirred no memories and didn't sound familiar at all.

"I cannot say for certain, princess. The devils certainly seem to believe in that. Which raises a question."

"A question?"

"If they believe in the existence of their god, bringing him back should be their first priority. So why do they waste time organizing demon attacks on humans? Isn't this odd?"

"...I am sorry, I still cannot wrap my head around this."

"If the Demon God is truly sealed away, the devils should be working to break or remove that seal, right?"

"...Right."

Although Olivia agreed hesitantly, she was still unsure on why would this make sense. Rion's train of thoughts was natural to him, because of all the fantasy novels Ryou had read in his life. People without such background would naturally struggle to follow this train of thought.

"And yet the devils are apparently not doing that, they are busy making sure people die instead."

Rion was basing his assertions mainly on Maria's inaction on the subject. The game protagonist was only trying to prevent major demon assaults and wasn't making any preparation to interrupt the breaking of the seal. That meant that there either was no such event in the game or that it was far off in the future. Rion was inclined to believe the former.

"And this leads me to believe that having people die is necessary for lifting the seal. Does this sound familiar, princess?"

"...Don't tell me, a human sacrifice?"

"Oh, so it does."

"I have come across legends of that type involving an ancient deity from the southern

part of the continent.”

“Is that so? Well, in our case, I believe things to be similar, even if I have no certainty. The devils probably require a huge number of human lives to be sacrificed to break the seal. That is likely why they incite demons to target humans. But if one wants a lot of people to die, demons are not the only way to go about it, right?”

“...Don’t tell me.”

The princess understood at last. Although it was something hard to believe, if this information proved to be true, it would be of grave importance to the Merica Kingdom. Olivia started to estimate possible consequences even while half of her mind was stunned in surprise.

“Incidentally, do not try to leverage this information to get other countries to attack Grann Flamm. Consequences for Merica would be rather dire.”

Rion immediately warned the princess. Out of pure good will in this case.

“Consequences for our country?”

“You have initiated this conflict. Clearly, there must have been someone to propose the invasion. And it wouldn’t be an insignificant bureaucrat. That person is rather important, right?”

“That’s...”

Olivia’s reaction showed that Rion’s conjecture was true. The war, exactly as Rion had said, had been based on a plan that a high ranking official had proposed to the king.

“I was spot on, huh... If that’s the case, I believe you should start having serious doubts about that person. Are they really working for the sake of your country? Did they really propose that invasion strategy with the aim of having Merica win?”

“...Are you implying that the person in question is a devil?”

“Again, I cannot say for sure. But I believe there’s a chance that you have been tricked. Top military officials of the Gran Flamm kingdom have promised a betrayal. This is proven beyond doubt. It is not a stretch to think that such a promise was what prompted your official to act.”

“...”

It was as Rion had said. But it would be naive to dismiss all the suspicions just because the government figure in question might have been tricked. Nevertheless, hearing Rion raise this possibility himself, only increased the authenticity of his words in Olivia's mind. She was now willing to believe the idea of traitors-devils.

“Does my idea sounds plausible now, princess?”

“...Yes.”

“Great. It's up to you to investigate the rest of the facts. But be careful, please. Their objective is to kill, they will not hesitate because you're a royal.”

“Alright.”

“Now then, sir knight, it's your job to help her highness with that. You should, by now, have a good idea of who exactly is suspicious , right?”

Rion turned towards the man standing behind Olivia, Yuri.

“...Was that not why you had me investigate all those things until now?”

Taking Olivia's captivity as a hostage situation, Yuri had felt himself forced to comply with numerous requests of Rion. Only now did he grasp the reason behind all that.

Rion had been using Yuri to gather intelligence required to support his idea.

And while Yuri had only been pretending to cooperate fully, purposely leaving out most of the important details, Rion was still able to see through the deception, and was able to uncover the truth within the limited information provided to him. Also, now the knight also understood why Olivia needed to be informed of this as well.

“Maybe. I believe that the two countries must cooperate in this case. Or at least stop hindering or trying to take advantage of each other.”

“Agreed. I think so too.”

At least, until the threat of the devils was hanging over the land. It might be a temporary truce, but for the most part, Olivia agreed with Rion.

“Excellent. With this, there’s no more reason to keep you here. Do return to your country at once, princess.”

“Eh?”

“I believe speed to be of the essence in this situation. If anything is required to enable you to travel faster, let me know, it will be arranged.”

“...Is this really fine?”

She already knew from the very start that Rion had been really serious about releasing her in the near future. So this last question was not addressed to him, but to the Knight Commander.

“...I saw and heard nothing. Hypothetically, if I were to find your royal highness in such circumstances, I would consider continuing to detain you a bad decision. I would also wish you swift return to your country so that you could shed light on the conspiracy and remove the devil in question. I would also consider a very close cooperation to be a splendid idea.”

“If you were to find me like that, I would give you my word as a Princess of the Kingdom of Merica, Lord Dawson.”

“Mhm. I will put my faith in those words. Now then, what are we going to do with that crucial country of ours, boy?”

Merica Kingdom’s matters would be left to Merican people. What Frederick wanted to know was how should the matters of Gran Flamm proceed according to Rion.

“Do you have no ideas of your own, old man?”

“Oh, I am thinking. Hard. But all this is a little... sudden.”

“That “suddenness” is your responsibility. You should have a greater ability to investigate than Bandeaux and yet you found out nothing. The truth is, I’m the one who wants to ask for more information.”

“All this is your fault, you know?.”

“Hah?”

“Every time you make a move, everyone’s attention gathers on you. In fact, they focus on you so much that they become blind to other things. Isn’t it about time for you to realize just what kind of person you are?”

The people in the room all showed their agreement, nodding along to the Knight Commander’s words. The only one who disagreed was the person in question, Rion.

“That is just passing your responsibility to others. But the Demon God aside, just how much do you think they have noticed?”

“They have at least noticed that his highness, the Crown Prince, was doubting them.”

“Arnold?”

“...Show a modicum of respect, please.”

The Knight Commander smiled bitterly as he said that and Olivia, listening from the side, was uneasy. In Merica, if the Crown Prince came to know that a viscount addressed him without the due respect, he would destroy that Viscount’s future. But she soon came to a conclusion that Rion’s attitude was beneficial to her country.

“His highness, the Crown Prince, I meant to say. Why would his highness do such a thing?”

“He expended quite the effort to prevent a punitive expedition upon your lands. Some of the exchanges he had with the main suspect seemed off to him.”

“So very unnecessary.”

“He did that on purpose. By implying betrayal, he has set certain things in motion. In a way, he was the closest to grasp your real motive.”

“But it could also end up a hindrance. Our targets are likely getting rid of evidence as we speak.”

“Evidence of what? The existence of a Demon God? How can you even prove somebody is a devil?”

“I don’t know. Demonic idols and the like? Eh, a long shot, I guess. Even if such things existed, they would not be easy to find.”

This was rather flippant, but Rion had for a long time sought a way to prove that a person was a devil in disguise. He had found nothing, which had been one of the reasons why he hadn't done more until now.

"...So how do you want to proceed?"

"Doesn't that woman know of a way to see through a devil's disguise?"

Love her or hate her, Maria was the one with most knowledge on the subject.

"I have not considered such a possibility, there was no reason to make such inquiries of Miss Theodore."

"...I guess there's nothing to expect from that direction, then. Especially if you still know nothing of use despite spending so much time around her. And, I guess, even if she knew something, she's still likely to lie and pretend otherwise."

It was obvious to Rion by this point that Maria wanted to rake in all the achievements worthy of the protagonist. She was acting based on her desire to be praised by the people, and she was likely to be fine with hiding information until a moment that offered the greatest opportunity to capitalize on it came.

"Do you really see no way forward?"

"Not entirely. But the only viable solution is a huge gamble, and I'm feeling hesitant."

"It will have to do for lack of other choices."

Frederick believed there was no more time for careful deliberations. Even as they were sitting here discussing the matters, the devils could be scheming something vile.

"Easy for you to say. It might make me a murderer, or a criminal that attempted murder. That means execution."

"...Is that so."

He finally understood the all-or-nothing gamble that Rion was hesitating about.

"Nevertheless, it has to be done. I have already discussed this with my wife, we'll go ahead."

“Is that so... So be it. If you fail, I shall join you on the gallows.”

“...Don't you be saying that so casually, old man.”

Several days passed. After seeing off Princess Olivia's and her attendants as they departed for Merica, Rion set out for the capital immediately. He was only accompanied by Frederick and the Royal Guards under the command of Sol Aristes. Not a single person from Bandeaux came with him. This was a precaution just in case someone planned to do something to Bandeaux in his absence.

Ariel knew that Rion wished it because he didn't want her to die in case something were to happen in the capital. And that was exactly why she chose to remain. Not to live on as Rion secretly wished her to, but to be able to die while exacting revenge.

She wished to deter the Kingdom from taking Rion's life by making everyone know this.

# Chapter 73

## Truth Revealed

The audience room of the Gran Flamm's royal castle was enveloped in an odd ambiance. Viscount Rion Frey, a rumored rebel, had finally accepted royal summons after an unprecedented dispatch of Knight Commander Frederick to Bandeaux to hold talks. On top of that, the unruly noble had been given a warm welcome and granted a personal audience with the royal couple. It was not a private meeting, though. Arnold, the Crown Prince, and an assortment of high ranking officials from different civil and military government branches would take part. And hardly any of them had an inkling of what was actually about to happen.

Soon enough, Rion arrived in the audience hall. Many of those present felt anxiety prompted by uncertainties raised by this occasion. Others, the hardline opponents of Viscount Frey, were watching the proceedings with bitterness in their hearts. For them, this audience was completely unnecessary. The Crown Marshal, a figurehead of this faction, was not even trying to hide his displeasure despite the presence of the King. This behavior only aggravated the existing anxieties.

"...He is here."

Impersonal mutterings, hard to attribute to anybody in particular, could be heard from different sections of the room. And indeed, Rion crossed the threshold being lead by Frederick inside.

He was the full focus of all kind of stares that had various degrees of hostility and fear mixed in, but he didn't care much. Rion had already gotten used to the unpleasant attention of others.

He and Frederick proceeded towards the throne quietly. The Knight Commander approached the King and knelt in front of his liege. And Rion sprang into motion.

In one fluid motion, he eased the blade from Frederick's waist and moved towards the throne.

"Wha!? Crown Marshall! Stop that man!"

Frederick's very flustered shout echoed in the room.

The Crown Marshall reacted with barely any delay. He drew his blade and slashed straight down making a shockwave of roaring wind cutting pass right in front of Rion's eyes as the youth was about to step in front of the King.

Having halted Rion in his tracks, the man followed up with a sideways slash. Clashing steel rang loud in the audience hall. Rion managed to stay on his feet despite the weight of the blow.

"So you have finally shown your true nature, immature fool!"

"Who are you calling a fool, you old fool?! If you don't want to die, step aside!"

"As if I would just because you say so!"

The Crown Marshall didn't waste any more time on throwing insults. He advanced on Rion and unleashed a flurry of blows. Rion met the man's attacks with his own blade and the clashing blades turned into a staccato of sound.

"...You sure are strong."

Inadvertent words of admiration escaped Rion's mouth. To be honest, he had never expected the Crown Marshall to be this strong. The man might have been inferior to Frederick when it came to speed, but he was the Knight Commander's better in other aspects.

"Ha! How many years do you think has it been since the first time I drew a blade? I cannot possibly be inferior to a mere country bumpkin."

"Start bragging when you obtain your strength by your own efforts!"

"Says who?! I, at least, do not rely on the Demon God to gain superficial strength!"

"...Oh, damn it! Old man! This guy is—"

Rion understood and notified Frederick of his mistake a second late. Before the youth was able to complete his sentence, two metal spikes shot out from the floor piercing his body and intersecting in his torso.

Fresh red blood trickled from his lips and, once the spikes withdrew, Rion collapsed to the ground. A silent scream of horror reverberated through the audience hall.

The people present were frozen in place, the situation unfolding in front of their eyes was beyond their comprehension. Only the Knight Commander reacted immediately. Without wasting even a second, Frederick closed the distance that separated him from the Head of Intelligence Bureau, and swung his blade sideways.

There was a loud metallic sound and James was blown away into one of the palace's pillars. No blood could be seen on the old knight's blade.

"...Hard. So, as he predicted, you are no human after all, huh?"

A normal person would end up with their gut slashed wide open. But the sensation Frederick felt from the blow was nothing like cutting flesh. It was as if he tried to slice through a plate of steel, or perhaps something even more durable.

"Mhm. To think that you would figure out this much. Well, it's probably all thanks to that Frey kind anyway, right?"

"Yes, that is true."

"As expected, really. From the beginning, we knew that he would be the greatest obstacle to us."

Using the fact that the devil had taken his eyes off him, the Knight Commander also threw a glance towards where Rion was lying. He felt some relief seeing the Queen earnestly try to heal the bloodied youth. Her Majesty's aptitude for magic was excellent as could be expected from someone of a Marquess House lineage.

"Name yourself, fiend. Or do you intend to hide behind that fake mask of "James"?"

"As if you could tell whether any name I give you is real. I am one of the four great demon generals, Goran of Steel."

"Eh!? Are you kidding!?"

This completely unsuited to the situation shout came from Maria. She was probably prompted by the "great general" title. But Frederick had no leeway to bother with the girl. A devil was finally revealed. The fiend would have to be dealt with here and now,

preferably captured, but killing him was also an option if the former proved too hard.

“Seal the room! Block any paths of escape!”

Jolted by the Knight Commander’s orders, the Royal Guard that escorted Rion recalled the plan of action. They drew their blades and formed a human wall surrounding Goran.

“Haha! Such futile effort! Gather as many of these mere knights as you want, it won’t matter one bit!”

“Ha! Back at you. A mere devil like you is something I can deal with by myself!”

In reality, Frederick was afraid that requesting any more help from the guardsmen would just make them get in the way, but there was, obviously, no need for him to say that. Neither the enemy nor his allies needed to know that.

The Knight Commander renewed his assault on Goran. However, the knight’s blade was being blocked by the devil’s bare arms. Again Frederick couldn’t shake the feeling that the sensation was really not the one of cutting a human’s limbs. And besides, a normal human’s arm wouldn’t be able to repel a sword.

At this moment, steel spikes and rods, like the ones that had pierced Rion, began assaulting the Knight Commander from below. He blocked them all, though, in a splendid display of skill.

“...This looks like magic, but is it really?”

This was the royal audience, the King himself was present. The best counter-measures against magic known to the Kingdom were deployed everywhere. They weren’t perfect, of course, and a talented, powerful magician would still manage to cast a spell if he wanted to. But that magician would find it much harder than usual to succeed and the effects would be noticeably weaker too.

However, the magic of the devil had proven to be effective enough to cause serious injury to Rion. The knight commander thought that to be really strange.

“Hahaha! There’s no need to hide it, so I may as well tell you. There are more magic attributes than the four you bastards use. Mine is steel, and no matter how many magical barriers against the four elements you make, my power will not be affected.”

“Steel attribute? I never heard of such a thing.”

“Of course, you haven’t. Our attributes originated from our god, Lord Daimon himself. That magic is different to the magic of this world. Once Lord Daimon revives, the attributes he embodies will replace yours as the foundations of this world, changing it into one more suitable for us to live in. Our dearest wish will come true!”

Upon the Demon God’s revival, the fundamental attributes of the world would be changed. There was probably no one in the royal palace who properly understood what this outrageous claim meant. Even Goran himself was, in reality, unlikely to understand much of what was involved.

A world whose basic building blocks changed would cease to be the world it once was. Nobody could know if it would still even be habitable for humans. Or devils for that matter.

“...Either way, your body is tough. That much is obvious.”

“Of course, human. It’s not like a mere thin iron plate, my body has the hardness of steel itself. You cannot cut that with a sword. You have no way of defeating me.”

“We shall see!”

Faster than the eye could see – this phrase fit Frederick’s bladework perfectly. And by lodging the edge into Goran’s shoulder, he proved that his blade could indeed cut into steel. But it couldn’t do more.

He had to take a great leap backward to evade the devil’s magical counterattack and the only thing that remained in his hand was the hilt of his sword. The blade itself remained in Goran’s body.

“Splendid. Truly. I felt an itch!”

Despite being pierced by the blade, the devil didn’t shed a single drop of blood. Everybody could see its words were not lies

“You fiend...”

“A new human, if you please. Once you monkeys go extinct, devils will finally rule the world.”

Saying this, Goran had surveyed the surroundings. And he noticed a group that stepped forward to challenge him.

“We won’t let such a thing to happen!”

“...You? What can a small fry like you even do?”

“What did you call me!?”

Having been called a small fry despite her role as the protagonist, Maria felt the blood rush to her head. Propelled by anger, she wielded her blade and attacked Goran. The result was roughly the same as when Frederick had tried. Goran took the strike with his arm.

But there was another blade incoming from the opposite side – Lancelot’s.

This one also stopped at Goran’s arm though.

“Eat this! “

With Goran’s two arms being preoccupied with blocking, Arnold attacked the devil’s chest with a spear. Unable to parry the momentum, the enemy flew backward again, but, once more, the weapon failed to penetrate.

“Hmph. Like replacing swords with spears will help you in any way.”

“That’s not a line of someone who has a sword stuck in his shoulder.”

While the Crown Prince assaulted with words, Maria and Lancelot continued to swing their weapons on Goran’s flanks. However, no matter how many times their blades found their mark, the devil showed no signs of faltering.

“Futile! Mere blades cannot defeat me!”

“Then how about magic?”

At the same time as the Crown Prince asked his question, Goran’s body was enveloped in flames. This was not Arnold’s doing. This was the King’s magic. This was why Maria’s group kept attacking Goran despite knowing it to be pointless. They had been buying time for the removal of anti-magic barriers.

The royal spell conjured flames big enough to make one think that Arnold himself would be caught up in the effect. Everyone thought that no matter how tough the enemy may be, there was no way he could survive this conflagration.

“...As expected of one wearing this crown. That was quite the spell. But I am steel. Flames cannot possibly burn steel.”

When the flames of magic dissipated, Goran stood where he had been standing, seemingly not even weakened, even if his clothes turned to ash.

Understanding that the devil had withstood the magic of the King caused everyone to groan.

“It’s true that fire cannot burn steel! But it can melt it!”

And just as the cloud of defeat had started to spread, Maria’s voice rang true. For the first time, ever since her arrival to this world possibly, she acted like a proper protagonist should.

“...You what?”

“Your highness Arnold! Erwin! Let’s go!”

Answering Maria’s call, Erwin and the Prince began their arias. Both of them overlapped with Maria’s own aria perfectly.

“...This is the strength of wind and flames together! Behold the new power brought into existence by our cooperation! Fusion!!”

The magic that Maria invoked was the extreme magic, fusion, that was supposed to be used against the Devil Generals. Devil Goran, belonging to the last-boss class, fully warranted having it used on him.

This time Goran’s body was wrapped by the flames conjured by the Crown Prince. And while the conflagration looked the same as before, the color of the flames started changing from normal, to yellow, and then to orange as it overlapped with Erwin’s wind spell.

“Hngg, Gghu...”

Goran could be heard groaning in pain this time. This was the proof that actual damage was inflicted. This display of the hero's magic briefly raised Maria's stock in everyone's eyes.

Not for long though. The flames around the devil soon lost their vigor and vanished entirely.

"No way!?"

Maria shouted astonished. And simultaneously, the feeling of defeat started to creep into everyone's hearts again.

However, both Frederick and Arnold took up their swords again without paying any mind to the general mood. They headed straight towards Goran and attacked while the last flickers of flame still clung to the fiend.

"...Heavens are merciful."

Goran, as previously, tried to receive Frederick's blade on his forearm. But this time the sword sliced cleanly through the devil's left arm and buried itself in the collarbone. Arnold's blade also bit deeply, and although the Prince did not manage to completely cut off his enemy's limb, he reached all the way to the bone.

"I see. Even though our spell did not burn him completely, he has lost the toughness."

"Y-You bastards..."

Confidence vanished from Goran's face. As Arnold and Frederick attacked again to finish him off, the fiend dodged and fled without hesitation.

"He must not flee! Finish him off!"

The Royal Guards swarmed fleeing Goran, but were scattered by iron pikes that rose from the ground en masse. Some guardsmen, trying to seal his escape path, created a human wall in front of the audience hall's entrance. The devil, however, had no need of doors, he just crashed into a wall ramming himself an exit. The great general escaped.

"What!?"

Frederick reacted late. Even though the toughness of the enemy was clear, nobody expected the creature to be capable of punching through massive palace walls by simply crashing into them. The surprise robbed the humans of precious seconds needed to stop Goran.

Not long after, more collapsing masonry could be heard from the distance. Another wall gave way.

“After him! He cannot escape!”

The Knight Commander jolted the knights into action but he was already inwardly lamenting the lost chance. The Devil, Goran, served as the head of the Kingdom’s intelligence operation. While his current way of escaping was flashy, once he lost the immediate pursuit, he would have many clandestine ways to flee.

“...Crown Marshal?”

“Unconscious, sir! He collapsed to the floor all of a sudden and is yet to awake.”

“...Is that so. Have him carried to a discrete room and arrange a physician to check his condition. The room is to have no windows and be locked from outside at all times. Guard him strictly. Understood?”

“Sir! Yes, sir!”

Frederick was half-certain that the Crown Marshal had not been subverted by the demon but rather controlled outright. But he would not let his guard down just yet. Also, controlled or not, it didn’t change the fact that the Marshall committed a crime.

With all the necessary orders issued, he could check up on Rion now.

The healing magic had been cast, yet the youth still kept lying on the ground. His wounds were deep, and, even with the Queen’s help, it was possible they would not seal completely.

“...Please, open your eyes. Please.”

Her Majesty could be heard praying. Frederick could see she was severely shaken and understood at a glance this was not good.

“Someone, anyone. Find a bed for Viscount Frey and carry him there. And do find out where are those doctors?”

A group of knights moved to carry out those instructions, but they were a little late. Rion rose from the floor and sat up before they managed to get close.

“Frey!”

“...Erm?”

Rion was quite confused. The first thing he saw after opening his eyes was the face of the crying Queen. And then the woman suddenly hugged him tightly.

“Eh!?”

“Frey... Thank goodness. I thought I failed to save you.”

“...Uh... Err, I am fine, majesty. So—”

“Please, do not ever leave my side from now. I cannot bear let you go again.”

“...Eh?”

The Queen’s words implied something. Rion couldn’t figure out what at first, and it took him time to process what he heard. Eventually, he got what she was saying, but he didn’t get why was she saying that to him.

Others, more experienced in life, understood everything much faster. What was happening in front of their eyes wasn’t a normal affair between a man and a woman. Those two barely had any chance to spend time together and the difference in their age was significant.

Which left but one reason for Her Majesty to treasure Viscount Frey this dearly despite all the arguments against.

“Sophia, dear. We do understand you find Viscount Frey adorable, nevertheless, such words can be easily misunderstood.”

“...Pardon the lapse, my lord husband.”

The words of the King awoke the Queen to the mistake she was just making.

“We remember the Viscount is an orphan and that desire to replace his mother is not something We can hold against you. How could we? But it is a bad thing when a sitting monarch shows favoritism. You do understand this, right?”

“...I do, sire.”

The King was eagerly and desperately trying to gloss over the situation. The Queen did her part too. But hardly anyone of those present believed this desperate effort. And this exchange finally cleared out the last question marks from Rion’s mind.

“...His Majesty is right. And not only the words, this position is also quite misleading.”

“Frey...”

Rion extricated himself from the Queen’s arms and stood up.

“My deepest apologies for making Her Majesty worry. As can be seen, my body is fine now.”

“...Do not push yourself needlessly.”

“I am not, my Queen. However... Her Majesty is right, of course. I am quite tired and I should return to lodging house to take a rest. May I have your leave, milady?”

“I will have a room prepared for you. Just rest there instead.”

“I couldn’t possibly. Nothing I’ve done deserves such grace. My Lords, Ladies, I bid you good day.”

“Frey!”

Rion headed straight out pretending not to hear the words of the Queen. Suddenly all the stares he was facing started to bother him again.

He preferred when people looked at him with scorn. These gazes of the new kind were just irritating. He wouldn’t yet admit that it wasn’t the looks that annoyed him so much.

Rion Frey was now aware of his lineage. And that knowledge only amplified the hurt in his heart.

# Chapter 74

## The Feelings That Were Shaken And Those That Remained Firm

A huge commotion erupted after Rion's departure despite the presence of the royal couple in the audience hall. A missing member of the royal family had been found at last and it was a prince, not a princess to everybody's great surprise. To be fair, people might have taken this calmer if the person in question wasn't Rion.

Many of those present had harbored malice towards Viscount Frey and actively acted against his interest. Those people all remembered what they had done and feared having their actions exposed. Others, those who saw Rion in a favorable light too felt a complex mix of emotions. They valued him highly because his abilities would be of great use to the kingdom while he was a vassal, but if he were to be a prince instead, those same abilities threatened catastrophe. After all, it was a common knowledge that there was no love lost between Rion and Arnold. Viscount Frey wouldn't be able to oppose the Crown Prince effectively, Prince Frey was a completely different proposition and a great source of worry.

Those, and many other, speculations clashed furiously in people's heads.

The King expected it to be difficult to control people in this situation, so he instructed the audience be dissolved. But this was exactly what his retainers wanted. There were things to be discussed, preferably without the presence of the monarch. Very soon, the audience hall stood empty.

The only people that remained were the King on his throne, greatly perplexed, Queen Sophia, beside her husband and in tears, the Knight Commander, with a complex expression on his face, and the Crown Prince.

The Crown Prince who looked to be on the verge of tears.

"...Father."

The King didn't even attempt to lift his face to answer his son. Or to be more exact, he

couldn't find it in him to lift his face all the more now that he was called. He could perfectly imagine Arnold's next words.

"Is Rion my younger brother?"

And here they were. Anybody would see that coming.

"...No."

The King replied with a single word without raising his head.

"Mother?"

"...Arnold."

The Queen's said nothing more, just her son's name. She did neither confirm, nor deny. Her innermost feelings didn't allow for anything else. This was pretty much the same as admitting everything, she just couldn't bring herself to deny Rion as her son anymore.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Having understood his mother's response, Arnold didn't have to repeat his question.

"Why would We? There never was anything to talk about. Even now nothing changed."

The King continued to feign ignorance. He put his duty as the monarch above his feelings as a father. And nobody could honestly fault him for that.

Arnold understood. Moreover, he knew that as the next king he should learn from his father. And yet...

"I... I had my brother's lord killed. Did I really just kill my brother's friend!?"

He could not make himself act as the Crown Prince, only as the King's son.

"You do not have a brother, boy!"

But even so, the King chose to not acknowledge Rion. Not even due to the fear of inheritance conflict. Acknowledging Frey as the missing prince would also, in turn,

acknowledge his wife's cruelty in abandoning their newborn child. As a ruler, and Sophia's husband, he could never do such a thing.

"...So be it, Father."

Arnold was not satisfied, but he understood that pressing his father any further would lead nowhere. And his mother's excessively pained expression stopped him from asking any more questions.

Crown Prince Arnold left the audience hall, his steps weak and unsteady.

"The spread of rumors can no longer be stopped, Majesty."

Once Arnold's silhouette vanished from sight, Frederick spoke up at last.

"We know. Still, We shall suppress as much as possible. The masses must not learn of this."

Rion was very popular among the commoners. Arnold's reputation was tarnished. If this news reached the wider masses, the results would be unpredictable and likely impossible to stop. A ruler had to prevent such a thing at all cost.

"How, Sire? The Intelligence Bureau is leaderless"

Controlling the flow of information from behind the scenes was usually the Bureau's job. But, as things were, they did not have the capability to enforce a gag order, and any attempt on their part to do so would only make the story spread even farther.

"...After today, We cannot simply appoint a successor."

The former head was a devil. This had been established without any doubts today, and that meant the whole organization was potentially tainted. Just appointing a new head would not do, everyone involved had to be investigated.

"There are also other things than the matter of Viscount Frey to consider, Sire."

"We know, Lord Dawson.... Gather Our cabinet, We must discuss measures against the devils."

"As you wish."

The Intelligence Bureau was not the only one in need of investigation and, possibly, reorganization. Other department heads had to be suspected now. It was even possible that another devil was hidden among the cabinet members.

The resulting inquiries would paralyze the Gran Flamm Kingdom for some time. The same thing should be expected to happen to the Merica Kingdom if they experienced a similar situation. The King knew he owed Rion some gratitude. Although, in the present situation, he could not quite make himself follow up on that.

Events started to move at rapid pace. Even Maria, with her great knowledge of the game, would now struggle to imagine the ultimate outcome. After all, the familiar story had by now changed into something completely else.



After leaving the audience hall, and the castle, Rion headed out into the capital city. The lodging house was not his destination. Truthfully, he didn't have one. He let his feet carry him wherever and, somehow, ended up at that place.

The execution grounds. For Rion, this location was Vincent's memorial.

He climbed the stairs of the gallows and fell to his knees. There were tears in his eyes and his thoughts mirrored Arnold's.

People responsible for Vincent's death were his own family.

This didn't mean that Rion had already acknowledged himself as a royalty. He wanted this whole mess to be a lie, or a misunderstanding. He wasn't sure he would be able to sort out his feelings otherwise.

He was very sure that the grudge born as a result of Vincent's death hadn't vanished from his heart.

However, the same heart ached when he contemplated whether he was capable of killing his brother. Before, he had been adamant about bringing the whole country, his parents' country, to ruin for smearing Vincent with all manner of crime.

Now, he wasn't sure if he was still capable of doing it. He struggled to find the same kind of resolve not only when it came to that ultimate goal, but even when he

considered his next steps.

It suddenly occurred to him that Ariel might have known of this. Perhaps, that was the reason why she had told him that it was fine to abandon their revenge. But even if that was the case, Rion didn't blame her for staying silent. He knew that she was just worried about him and that she was likely troubled as well.

Thinking of Ariel caused Rion's mood to improve.

In the end, she was the most important thing in his life and that fact didn't really change. She had been, and still was, his absolute top priority.

He slowly stood up from the boards and a bit of strength returned to his gaze. He turned around and headed towards the exit where a person welcomed him. Sol Aristes.

"...Do you need anything?"

"Well... How to put it... I am at your service, lord."

Sol said that with a bit of hesitation.

"...That's news to me. Wasn't that missing princess your destined master?"

"Well... I do not know how that came to be, but I was told that you are, in fact, the missing royal child."

"What are you talking about? I grew up in the slums. I do not know who my parents were."

"I have finally found you! Why are you like this!?"

Rion's attitude had prompted Sol to raise his voice.

Rion was the destined lord Sol had been searching for all this time. Now that he found that person having that event brushed off so casually was unbearable.

"Even if I were who you say I am, I wouldn't have you serve me."

"...Why is that?"

“I have told you this once before. When I served, I served the person named Vincent Woodville, not Lord Vincent, the heir apparent of House Windhill. I will never accept subordinates that choose their lord by his title.”

“...You’re wrong. I’m not like that at all. I—”

The desire to serve Rion had already planted itself inside Sol. However, the part of him that was a Royal Guard couldn’t bring himself to do that, that would be betraying the Princess he should be serving, and so he could not put his true feelings into words before.

But if Rion was that “princess”, Sol would be able to follow his wish. This incident made him rejoice from the bottom of his heart.

“Just... stop. My family is Ariel, and Ariel alone. I do not have any family other than her and neither do I need one.”

However, Rion didn’t feel like hearing Sol’s explanations.

“Wait, please!”

Sol frantically tried to prevent Rion from leaving.

“I’m sorry, but let me be alone for now. I do not want anybody’s company.”

But, after being told this, the guardsman couldn’t prevent the youth from leaving any longer. He knew why Rion had come to the site of Vincent’s execution after learning the truth of his birthright.

He would eventually come to regret letting the boy go, though.

After parting from Sol, Rion headed to the lodging house, a thing confirmed by many eyes observing his every move. By virtue of today’s events, he had attracted much attention, after all. All of them lost his trail pretty soon though and the only thing that remained was a letter addressed to the Knight Commander.



All the figures important to the devil subjugation process were gathered in the palace’s conference hall. It was not just the members of the military, but even the

civilian subordinates of the Prime Minister, who were called here while in the middle of a completely different meeting.

The reason for the meeting was a letter written by Rion that the Knight Commander passed to the King.

It was presented in front of everybody attending the conference, with the seal unbroken. Numerous people knew that Rion had left a letter behind, this careful method of handling it would prevent any unnecessary doubts aimed at the youth who discovered himself to be a royalty.

The King broke the seal and read the contents silently and nobody but him knew what was written. But based on the people summoned to attend, it was obvious the letter was related to the devils.

“We see everyone is present. Good. Some explanations are in order before we start.”

Having confirmed the attendance, His Majesty started the proceedings.

“My King, a moment please.”

However, the Prime Minister raised an objection.

“What is it?”

“Not all of those present seem to belong here, Sire.”

“...We have no objections.”

The King knew who the Prime Minister was referring to. After all, he counted them too when he had been checking if everyone was present.

“But Sire, are we not about to conduct a very important conference?”

The Prime Minister didn't back down despite the King's words. It was not unexpected, the people he took umbrage to were Cassius and the other Clan Heads.

“But they do belong here, my good sir. Father summoned everyone involved in the subjugations. They are involved.”

Arnold, being the one who brought Cassius and the others here, challenged the man in his father's stead.

"Even if they are, they are not direct vassals of the Crown. The right to sit at this table aside, they don't even have the right to meet His Majesty. Am I wrong, Highness?"

From the King's perspective, the Clan Heads, as retainers of Rion, were at most provisional vassals. This way of using Cassius and the other's presence was a subtle way to declare Rion nothing more than a Viscount.

Arnold, on the other hand, by silently bringing the Clan Heads to the table was implying that Rion's retainers were direct vassals of the royal clan.

"Their oath of allegiance has been temporarily transferred to me. This makes them my retainers for the time being. With this in mind, are they still unworthy of attending this conference?"

The Crown Prince had no grounds to say that Rion's retainers were direct vassals. So he used sophistry instead.

"I see, highness. Nevertheless..."

"Arnold. Do they know?"

Because the King couldn't see his son backing down from this, he decided to resolve the matter personally. For him, such bickering in the present situation was a waste of precious time.

"It seems that Rion did send them a missive, Father."

"...What have they been told?"

The King briefly wondered when did Rion have the time to do such a thing, while at the same time thinking that it was to be expected of him.

"That they must not be swayed by any rumors they may hear. That they should do what they must. Nothing more."

"We see..."

The King struggled to properly judge this action. Had this been Rion's refusal to accept his own royal bloodline? An expression of doubt about the veracity of those claims. The monarch valued Frey's abilities highly and feared him for that exact reason.

"Do you not think of returning?"

While his liege struggled with his thoughts, Frederick questioned the Clan Heads.

"...It is clear to us that our lord wishes us to see the subjugation to the end."

Cassius answered as the representative.

"Mhm. Have you heard the rumors yet?"

"...We have, Lord Dawson."

"What do you think?"

Frederick was the only person present able to ask such a question casually. This wasn't callousness, he thought that asking this would be the fastest way to resolve this incident.

"...Whoever Lord Rion may be, things for us won't change. From the very start, we thought of him as a strange man, one we were drawn towards nonetheless."

Cassius emphasised the name in order to show that their devotion to Rion was not related to his title.

"Mhm..."

With this, the Knight Commander got a bit more than he bargained for. The answer he wished for was that they would continue to follow Rion as their feudal lord. That they would continue serving him as the lord of Bandeaux. However, Cassius, lacking the political mind to offer the "best" answer could only reply with his honest feelings. And those could be interpreted as their desire to follow Rion no matter what he planned to do. To be fair, that wasn't much of a surprise.

"Enough of this. Time is pressing, let us start the proceedings."

Seeing that the situation was going nowhere, the king forcefully dismissed the whole

matter and ordered the conference to start. He was right to state there were urgent matters to take care of.

“Viscount Frey sent Us the information he obtained on the subject of the devils and his resulting conjectures. We wish to hear opinions on his theories.”

“What kind of conjectures, My King?”

The Prime Minister, thus far hesitant about starting the meeting, was the first to react after hearing the information came from Rion. He took part in uncountable number of conferences on this subject, but none of those was called with the intention to discuss countermeasures.

And with top government officials being currently investigated one at a time, without a plausible end in sight, the political apparatus of the Kingdom ground to a halt. The Prime Minister, as the most important official in the land, was the most unhappy with the situation.

“It is possible that the lair of the enemy lies in the capital.”

“What!? That is absurd!”

“Viscount Frey provided multiple reasons to substantiate this theory. The first being that the demon attacks could have been purposefully concentrated along the borders of the Kingdom to draw the army away from the capital, leaving the defenses undermanned and open for Merican invasion.”

“Would the demons be capable of such tactics...?”

“They have shown to be capable of intricate schemes during the war with Merica. They have shown themselves capable of striking us in the back while we were in battle. Why would they not be capable of this?”

This argument was also included in Rion’s letter. But the King was cunning enough to present it in his own words, since many of those present would oppose any of Rion’s ideas because of who authored them.

“...There is no reason they would not, Sire.”

“The second reason involves the former Head of the Intelligence Bureau. The fiend

called himself one of the four Great Generals, clearly a high position in the enemy hierarchy. But during the time he had disguised himself as a loyal subject, the creature hardly left the capital. If the demon leadership operates in any way similar to the way we do, they must be meeting regularly somewhere close in the capital.”

“...They could have used the teleportation magic.”

Nothing less could be expected of the Prime Minister. He instantly pointed out a flaw in the reasoning.

“That was established to require huge amounts of mana. Therefore it could not be done in one place repeatedly. And if they tried to change the location each time, the chance of them being discovered would be high.”

There was no way Rion would miss the possibility teleportation magic had been used. And he rejected that as impossible.

“That is true, Sire. Furthermore, a search for traces of such magic in the capital was conducted many times. Nothing was found.”

“Couldn’t they’ve done that outside the city limits?”

The Prime Minister was convinced, but the Acting Marshal of the Crown asked one more question. The man was a former deputy of his disgraced predecessor, who was still under arrest and would be made to resign soon.

“There would be records of him leaving the city. Even for someone in his position, frequently leaving the capital for unknown purpose would cause suspicion.”

“He managed to perfectly vanish from the city just now. Considering his supposed profession, wouldn’t he have clandestine ways to go in and out of town at hand?”

“That is possible, indeed.”

The observation was correct. The subject of the discussion was a devil. It would be naive to expect the fiend to brazenly and foolishly come and go via the main gate.

“Which is why the letter mentions another possibility tied to the first one.”

This possibility was also within Rion’s expectation though. His letter predicted, and

answered, all the criticisms even though the author wasn't here.

"What kind of possibility, Sire?"

"According to Viscount Frey's letter, the enemy's base may be underground."

"...Underground? Eh? Sire, could that possibly be about the capital's catacombs?"

Connecting the sudden disappearance of the unmasked devil with the possibility of their headquarters being underground, would naturally lead one to this conclusion.

"Exactly. But rather than being in the catacombs themselves, the enemy lair is connected to them."

"What does Viscount Frey base this theory on?"

"He started with the demon horde's whereabouts. Hiding a horde numbering hundreds of thousands requires a place where people will not stumble upon them by chance. We know they are not in the wilderness along our borders, they would have no need for magic circles to move about if that was the case."

"What are the other reasons, Sire?"

They could be underground, but they also could not. It wasn't as though mountains and forests suitable to hide a huge number of demons could only be found near the national borders.

"There is an abandoned castle not far from the capital where Our son was attacked some time ago. During that incident, the demons came from under the ground. We believe that to be enough reason to investigate the catacombs, even if the reasons are otherwise inconclusive."

"Oh, this is bad..."

With the exception of Cassius' group, everyone present was aware of the event that occurred in the abandoned castle during the Crown Prince's Academy years. The aftermath had been investigated, of course, but that investigation concluded as soon as it was established that the defeated undead all turned into sand.

Such lack of thoroughness was highly unsatisfactory now, but the World made things

be so, as any other outcome would inconvenience the overarching plot.

“And then, there is the final argument, or rather conclusion.”

“Conclusion?”

“Viscount Frey advises asking miss Maria Theodore whether any, or all, of those theories are, in reality, facts. He writes that she is certain to know the location of the final battle against the demons, he proposes she should be tortured were she to feign ignorance.”

“What?”

“So, miss Theodore? Do you feel like telling us the honest truth? The safety of the realm is under threat, your gender and status can no longer be a reason to reject certain methods in search for information.”

“...I know where it is.”

The gaze of the King was strict, there would be no laughing this away with a joke. So Maria didn't try to make a stand against that threat. Her information pretty much validated the entirety of Rion's letter.

Finally, the last, decisive battle with the demons would happen, but it wouldn't be a simple affair. According to Maria's statement, they should be expecting an attack from both above and under the ground.

If they wanted to be the ones attacking, they would have to find the enemy's lair without the devils learning that the Kingdom was coming. Only after discovering that location, scouting the enemy forces and assembling an army to match them, would they be able to launch a strike. There were still many, many things to do before the final battle.

But, without a single doubt, the struggle against the devils was reaching its conclusion. The story of the game would soon reach its end.

# Chapter 75

## People who act, and people who can not

The preparations for the decisive battle with the devils were progressing steadily. It was clear what needed to be done, and it was also clear that only the Crown had the power to see them through. Nevertheless, the process would take time, and the decisive day was still distant. Right now, there was a more immediate issue on people's mind. Rion. It was obvious to people that the King tried to put the matter of Viscount Frey on hold by prioritizing the upcoming subjugation, but that stratagem did not work very well. The issues concerning the newly-found royal child were a very popular, and stubbornly resurfacing, topic of conversation. And those conversations were slowly turning more and more questionable in nature.

"My king, I have a proposal to make regarding Viscount Frey's future."

This was the Prime Minister raising that exact matter during a regular cabinet meeting. Given the recent turn of events, the truth could not be hidden from him any longer, and his proposal would come with Rion's true identity in mind.

"...What would that be?"

Having even his Prime Minister raise the topic made the King really fed up.

"I believe the Crown should arrange a new marriage for him."

"Pardon?"

Whatever the King had expected to hear, it wasn't anything of this nature.

"In fact, I have already picked suitable candidates. The details are in those documents here, all that is left is for you to pick the best match, Sire."

The Prime Minister had indeed prepared a set of dossiers already, and he presented that bundle of documents to his monarch.

"Wait just a minute, please. You are aware that Viscount Frey is already married, right?"

“I am, and it is my view that a new wife should be arranged, Majesty.”

“...Explain?”

The King struggled to figure out the intentions behind this proposition.

“The current Lady Frey is a scion of the House Windhill. This is going to pose problems to the Crown.”

“...All her ties to that House are broken.”

Things had fallen into place, and it became obvious what the Prime Minister was worried about. This kind of Prince Rion’s connection to a marques house was undesirable, and given how much Marques Windhill doted on his daughter, the Prime Minister’s fears were hard to dismiss. But the strength of the bond between Rion and Ariel was also well known to the King. Trying to separate them would just lead to more bad blood between the youth and the kingdom.

“On that subject, sire, is it wise to have her keep bearing those crimes in the future? In my opinion, that too is problematic.”

“That...”

Just like that, the Prime Minister pointed out a very thorny problem. As he said, Ariel’s indictment should probably be reversed. However, that was tantamount to the Crown admitting to a high profile mistake. The King found it very hard to respond to this question.

“The majority of the populace already believes that the charges against Vincent Woodville and Viscount Frey’s wife to be false. Sire, I believe that a public recognition that a mistake was made combined with restoring the honor of those two would be a great aid in repairing the trust between the subjects and the Crown.”

The distrust of the government and the aristocratic houses prevalent among the populace was in part rooted in the punishment handed to Vincent and Ariel. Once Rion captured people’s hearts with his deeds, the popular view of his former lord and the lord’s sister improved tremendously while the reputation of the royal family and the aristocracy plummeted. At this point, the only way to reverse this was to pull out the problem by the roots. This explanation left the King shaken.

“That may be so, but...”

The King hesitated and reached for the stack of documents presented by the Prime Minister at the start of this conversation. He hadn't decided to go along with this marriage proposal yet, but he wanted to check which ladies the man considered suitable.

“...My good man, are you serious about this?”

The first page of the document was completely bewildering.

“This option would cause the least amount of problems, sire.”

“Would it not cause the most, actually? Maria Theodore was the instigator of the events leading to Vincent Woodville's death.”

The Prime Minister's preferred option was Maria Theodore. The King was beginning to doubt the man's sanity.

“That may be so, sire, but I have two reasons. First, her family has no political influence of note. Second, the marriage would appear to reconcile the two of them and put any rumors around her involvement to rest.”

“And once the rumor of their reconciliation spreads, Rion's reputation will suffer. Was that on your mind too, Prime Minister?”

Arnold had been listening to this conversation in silence until now, but this question made him cut in. He could no longer stay silent after what he had heard.

“...All this is for my Crown Prince's sake.”

If Rion were to abandon Ariel to marry Maria instead, the citizens would take it as a betrayal. Given his current fame, the backlash would be all the stronger, and Arnold's reputation would be safe from further harm. The public perception would be that now that Rion was a royal, he decided to prioritize his position over his love.

“It may well be for my sake, but it will not be good for the country.”

“I...”

The Prime Minister took that reply as Arnold implying that it would be better for the country to have Rion as the next king. The Crown Prince could immediately see that on the man's face.

"Don't misunderstand. I want to make this country flourish as its next king."

"Is that is so, Highness, then why?"

"Because losing Rion would be a great loss to the Kingdom's future."

"...Would we really lose him over that?"

The Prime Minister didn't understand Rion at all. He thought that being made aware of his lineage would make the youth feel kinship and loyalty to his rediscovered family, and the kingdom his parents were governing. That, in his mind, would be a natural outcome. He didn't know that Rion never had never felt any filial piety, and hadn't had a single memory of being loved by his family. His only true feelings were for Ariel, his sole love, and family in this world.

"He would likely disappear himself to somewhere else the very moment such a request was made of him. He could go anywhere, even Merica wouldn't be out of the question."

It wasn't even a case of personal worry. Once rumors of his imminent self-exile started circulating, the Kingdom of Merica could be guaranteed to not leave Rion be.

"But..."

"If we were to lose him, that would be one thing. But it would be a completely different matter were he to turn into our enemy. Prime Minister, I am not trying to stop you from doing what you think best regarding Rion. Nevertheless, I believe you should tread carefully where your actions might provoke him."

"...This might be bad."

Arnold's words made the Prime Minister wince.

"Don't tell me you have already made your move on this?"

"No, Highness, the Crown has done nothing yet. But we are not the only group faced

with the question of Viscount Frey.”

A Crown Prince of ill repute and an excelling second royal son, a pairing that naturally invited comparison. And for those who saw nothing to gain in the elder son’s ascendance to the throne a potential chance to gamble with their fate. It was a predictable development if Rion’s lineage were to be acknowledged. And even if it were not, the succession conflict was already slowly rumbling behind the scenes no matter how many times the King would deny his second son the recognition. The feelings of those directly involved were of no concern to those that would play the game of thrones.

“...Humans can be so greedy and foolish, sometimes.”

Arnold spat out his reply in disgust.

“Highness, a crown prince should never speak like this”

“Why? It is the truth.”

“Even so, how can Highness govern people by scorn? Humans are indeed foolish, and that is exactly why they have to be led by somebody. That is what a king is.”

“...You are right. Thank you. I will keep that in mind.”

“I am glad to hear that, Highness.”

The Prime Minister was satisfied with Arnold’s words. They meant that the next king would, at the very least, lend an ear to the words of his retainers while showing enough generosity to thank them for their advice. Regardless of what the popular evaluation of the Crown Prince was at present, he now thought that this royal had an excelling disposition.

“Let us go back to the topic at hand. Do you know who are the people to make contact with Rion?”

“We do not have a proper grasp of that, Highness. Unfortunately, the Intelligence Bureau is still not functioning as it should be.”

“I see...”

The problems related to the disarray at the Intelligence Bureau were not limited to foreign matters alone, internal information gathering had also been affected greatly. And, right now, that was a great problem for the government officials when it came to dealing with domestic politics. The aristocrats represented by the marques houses might have been retainers of the Crown, but they could never be completely trusted. The fear of rebellion was ever-present and there had been many cases in the past where aristocracy moved against the Crown. The powerful nobles had to be watched very carefully.

Arguably, current circumstances were ideal for a repeat from history – the royal family's reputation among the common people was poor, and there was a popular figure that could be a leader for the malcontents. It was easy to understand why the Prime Minister would want to dissolve Rion's marriage to Ariel.

"With regards to this matter, I have dispatched a man to Bandeaux. This should allow us to obtain some information on those people."

Just as the gloomy atmosphere started to spread around the conference room, the Knight Commander started to talk.

"Someone from the Royal Guard?"

The Guard was not usually involved in intelligence gathering activities, it wasn't odd that the Prime Minister was doubtful.

"Someone from the Royal Guard. I have sent Sol Aristes."

"That..."

The Prime Minister was well aware of who Sol was, and of how much the knight was disappointed by having been sent away by Rion.

"According to sir Aristes' own words – he is not a fool who would just give up after being left behind; if he cannot willfully chase after Viscount Frey without being told to by others, he has no right to serve under the man."

"That is oddly similar to a love affair."

"Quite so. That is just how bothersome Rion Frey's personality is."

“I see.”

“Therefore, even though my word has no weight when it comes to matters of politics, excellency, I have to stress I am of the same mind as his highness regarding Viscount Frey.”

“And now I understand where that is coming from, Lord Dawson, but I worry that this will not stop others from making a move.”

“Viscount Frey is not someone that would just move as people would have him to. On the contrary, he is likely to take advantage of the people that try to play him. Which, on reflection, is fine too.”

“...On what basis do you make this assumption, if I may ask?”

“His words to the Bandeaux Clan leaders present. “Doing what must be done.” I believe that was a message meant for us as well, that we must prioritize crushing the demonic menace first. If he was really planning something, he would take those people back with him.”

“Hostages, of sorts?”

This was not really correct. From the very start, Rion had no intention of involving Cassius and others in his revenge. Therefore if they had decided to raise the standing of Bandeaux within the Kingdom, they should, in his opinion, focus on that and do whatever needed to be done. Nevertheless, it was true he had no intention of enacting his revenge at this moment. He had always been waiting for the game’s story to end. Furthermore, the iron grip of the scenario and other current matters forced him to reconsider his future plans again.

“Hmph. Somehow...”

The King suddenly started to speak sounding displeased.

“Your Majesty? Is something wrong?”

“We feel like Lord Dawson knows Rion better than we do.”

“...Majesty? Are my ears not deceiving me?”

The King suddenly acting like an aggrieved parent in a discussion on such a serious subject amazed the Prime Minister.

“I am sure this is merely due to difference in time spent with him, sire.”

“The difference is not that big, is it not?”

“Sire forgets that I have been with the boy for a month while we traveled to the capital. He seems really hard to please but, at the same time, likes to talk a lot. I managed to understand a lot of things about him thanks to that.”

“Have you now.”

“Worrying as it may sound to his excellency, the prime minister, I do understand why people are so fascinated by him. There are those moments, the rare times when Viscount Frey shows a different side to him. He seems cold, yet warm, seemingly indifferent, yet gentle... unsociable, yet friendly. Some people even say his differently-colored eyes represent those conflicting sides.”

“Is that so...”

Those same eyes had brought about this current situation, though. If Rion hadn't been born with heterochromia, he would have undoubtedly been raised as a second prince, not abandoned. That Prince Frey would surely have been very different from the current Rion. Rion was an amalgamation of Flay from the slums and Ryou from another world. Him having the same capability if he were to be raised in the royal family from the start was hardly possible.

But people in this room lacked the knowledge of his background, so they were regretting that heterochromia robbed them of something that couldn't be.



There were three people for whom revelations about Rion's origin had come as a shock of the highest magnitude – Maria and her two stooges.

Of those three, Lancelot was affected the harshest. After all, he had made a fatal blunder in the past – he had attempted to assassinate Rion. And while Erwin had done the same, the Windhill's hitmen had never found the target. Lancelot's, though, had

been wiped without a trace and it was obvious Rion had managed to turn the tables on them. Now that he had witnessed Rion in battle, Lancelot was sure a group of apprentice mages had been no match for him.

And on top of all that, he had also spread insinuations about Rion being a devil and conspired with others to kill him in battle. He couldn't even blame this on being manipulated by Goran because that could be taken as a proof of cooperation with an actual devil.

Attempting to take the life of a royal was a serious crime, a high treason, and Lancelot was very aware of that fact. If his deeds were ever to come to light, the only future awaiting him would be execution.

What was worse, he could not see a path that would allow him to avoid that future. He couldn't rely on Arnold here. In fact, he couldn't even say a word about this subject to the Crown Prince for obvious reasons. And his family couldn't be relied on either.

The Queen had been born in House Aquasmea, and because of that, there was a potential connection between the family and Rion. Lancelot was well aware that Marques Aquasmea was already scheming how to pull the hugely popular Viscount Frey into his camp. Heck, Lancelot had even been ordered to deepen his relationship with the younger prince.

Were Marques to learn that his heir had botched an assassination attempt against the very same prince in the past, he would, without a doubt, find himself a new heir. It wouldn't even be strange if he decided to discreetly eliminate Lancelot on top of that. Leading a huge aristocratic family demanded a certain degree of ruthlessness when it came to protecting the said family from threats.

So Lancelot had no idea what to do. He could only pray not to be exposed and shamefully beg Rion to keep their past to himself. He would be hugely grateful for a chance to improve their relationship like his father had instructed, but he was under no illusions either. There was no way that would happen.

The second stooge, Erwin, had also been shaken by the sudden news, but his reaction differed from Lancelot's. He had barely had any contact with Rion in the past, their one short conversation being little more than an exchange of greetings. His name hadn't been officially dragged into the matter of Vincent either, despite his actual involvement. Honestly, he expected to be the least hated of the three avowed enemies

of Rion.

Furthermore, in contrast to Lancelot, his position had actually improved with the revelation that Rion was in fact royalty. Now there was absolutely nobody else that could inherit House Windhill, as any child of Rion and Ariel would be raised as a royal and thus unable to challenge his claim. Learning the truth of Rion's origins had made Erwin happy.

That left him with only one spot of bother – which of the princes to support should the two of them come to blows. There was no doubt that both Ariel and Rion hated him. However, there was also no doubt that Rion ascending to the throne would be more beneficial to the growth of House Windhill than he was going to inherit. This dilemma made it hard choosing a side. He could not ask Lancelot for an advice, though, the heir of Aquasmea would likely go into a fit of rage when asked for help about such a luxurious problem.

For some reason, the current Marques Windhill had done nothing yet, despite the revelations. He had even upheld Ariel's banishment. Erwin considered this irresponsible. The House head's stubbornness in those kind of matters was, as always, annoying.

And even Windhill's retainer families were surprisingly noncommittal. The first among them, Viscount Austin, shrugging off Erwin's questions and requests for advice with vague words. Erwin couldn't know that Viscount Austin still wanted to kill Rion because the latter knew his deepest secret – that he was Erwin's real father.

As a result, Erwin too could do nothing and had to watch the events unfold.

Finally, there was Maria, and Maria was in despair.

Rion was revealed to be the second prince, and her first reaction was that it had made him be the best hidden character in the game for real. Looks good enough to be mistaken for a woman, a strategic mind dwarfing other characters, and an unprecedented setting position of a hidden second prince...

Had she been able to capture him, they would certainly have succeeded in subjugating the devils together and she would still have been seen as the hero by the citizens. With those achievements, and her popularity, Rion would then end up as the next king instead of Arnold. Maria would have been the queen. Just as she wanted.

None of this was possible, of course. Maria just assumed that to be a possible hidden ending to the story she didn't know about.

What she did know was that Rion's capture failed and her prioritized route had also ended in failure. The way the game was playing out, there would be no happy ending for her.

Officially, preventing the Demon God's resurrection may have been a good ending in the game, but this alone was not enough to satisfy her. She was a woman of the highest grade, she deserved the best rewards. She deserved the crown. She was yet to give up on it.

But a viable path to that goal still eluded her.

Asking Charlotte to mediate between Rion and herself was a failure even despite the veiled threats of revealing what actually happened during the Academy days. The Fatillas girl refused bluntly, even going so far to say that she didn't care what Maria told to Prince Arnold. Maria didn't know this happened because Charlotte had revealed the truth to Arnold already and that Rion was the only thing on her mind now. Even if she were to be scorned as a result of the truth coming out, Charlotte would remain faithful to Rion, as without that much resolve she would have no chance of being forgiven by him.

Maria didn't think there was any chance the present her could mend her relationship with Rion. Going to his fief to establish direct contact might be a start, but pressing devil-related matters were holding her back in the capital and she couldn't leave for that long.

The decisive battle with the devils was approaching quickly.

It signaled the imminent end of the story and, for now, she could do nothing except let the game run its course.

# Chapter 76

## Event: The Final Battle Part 1

Rion had returned to Bandeaux in order to carefully consider the future in peace. Unfortunately for him, other people had different ideas. The rumor about him being the missing prince was spreading like a wildfire among the nobles of the Kingdom. This, in his mind, put the country's ability to hold onto confidential information in serious doubt. That was certain to cause problems, and not to the Kingdom alone. Bad things tended to happen when many parties at once started to desperately chase after information about something.

Even now, those who had come to know that Rion might be a royal had begun to approach him assertively, just like the officials present during the latest royal council session had expected.

The nobles neighboring Bandeaux were the first to act due to the geographical location. They didn't need any excuse for making contact. After all, who would begrudge them seeking harmony in relations between fiefs that border each other?

The rumor being unconfirmed for now, their main objective was just to establish a connection. Their envoys were coming with innocuous messages that hinted at things while at the same time fishing for more information. Rion had no choice but play that game with them. At the same time, he had to be mindful not to carelessly say anything rash like naming himself as royal.

Then, when the stream of envoys from his immediate neighbors dried up, those from more remote territories started arriving. This continued for days and days. Dealing with all those messengers accumulated mental fatigue over time, and took precious time that Rion would rather spend on thinking about his future or governing the territory. This course of events might have been for the best, though. It allowed him to recover emotionally, and prevented him from thinking about unnecessary things.

And then, finally, the relentless tide of envoys subsided, giving him a bit of free time. Free time that he obviously spent on dealing with things he was prevented from handling before.

“...Alright.”

Rion just finished sorting the mountain of paper piled on his desk into boxes they belonged in. That almost took care of the overdue correspondence.

“What exactly is “alright”, dear?”

The question was Ariel’s.

“Hmm?”

“Have you finished sorting the letters, perhaps?”

“Ah, yes.”

“Why did most of them end up on one stack, pray tell?”

“...Well.”

Ariel’s eyes were narrowed slightly, an expression she tended to make when she was angry. Rion had seen this countless times by now, but this time he had no idea what was the reason.

“And the strangest thing, all those letters came from various ladies, no?”

“...You can’t possibly say that just by looking at them.”

Those letters were messily piled in one box. Just by looking at them, you could at most see glimpses of the top three. That surely was not enough for making assumptions about the rest, which raised the question – how had Ariel known?

“I have read them all before. Dear.”

Of course she had.

“...I should have known.”

“They did bear names of the ladies I am acquainted with, after all.”

“That they do. We both know them from our Academy days after all.”

Rion called them acquaintances, but, in fact, all the girls he had gotten to know back then differed greatly. They had been aristocrats, female students, maids, and many others. There had only been one thing all of them had in common.

“When you say you “knew” them, how... intimate was this knowledge?”

“Well...”

That clearly showed it wasn't a subject he was happy to broach with his wife. Ariel's gaze turned harsher by the second.

“Ari, you know how it was back then. It was necessary to counteract the bad reputation.”

In other words, those letters were from women Rion had approached during those days when he had worked tirelessly to raise Vincent's reputation and remove the stains on his name.

“I know that... But... This many...”

Ariel, of course, knew about Rion's numerous intimate relationships while he had been in the Academy. After all, he hadn't exactly tried to hide that from her. But she had never expected for there to be just so many of them. Or to see some of the names she had seen in those letters.

“Many? Oh, it's not like that. Not with all of them.”

“What do you mean by “that”?”

“Look, I was just saying... Those girls who were thinking that they had some sort of connection to me have sent their letters.”

“You mean love letters?”

“No, Ari. Just... No. Sure some of them gave a bit of that vibe, but none of them were serious. They were just trying to rekindle the old connection we used to have. And not out of their own volition either, they were simply told to do so by others.”

True enough, most of the letters that had arrived had that exact goal – make use of the connections of the past to establish a relationship to Rion in the present. Many of the senders came all the way from the past Academy days.

“...So that is why they brought up your past relationships? Quite well written, those.”

“If they lacked the capability to do that, they wouldn’t go for a relationship with a valet anyway. Well, that aside, the parents and husbands that made them send those letters honestly leave me a bit speechless.”

“...I agree.”

Those men were thinking of using the illicit relationships of the past to gain connections in the present. Ariel found it rather hard to comprehend, as she had nobody like that in her life. Certainly, if Rion dared suggest such a thing, she would slap his cheeks swollen with all her strength without a moment of hesitation.

“Well, it just shows how untrustworthy they are.”

“Then, you probably shouldn’t have read them.”

Ariel couldn’t stop herself from complaining some more even though she understood the circumstances now. Some of those love letters have been passionate, and she had read them all. She couldn’t help being displeased.

“Maybe. But if I did that I might miss people with genuine special circumstances. That’s why I checked them out.”

“Are there any?”

“A few. Those letters are in this other box.”

That box had three, maybe four letters in it. This marked all the others as untrustworthy, as expected. But the fact that Rion even found any he was willing to trust in meant that he had actually gotten kinder to others compared to his past self.

“What do you plan to do with those four?”

“Still thinking about it. I’m considering sending assistance to those whose problems can be settled with money as a gratitude for what they did for me during the Academy days. But when it comes to the rest... I honestly don’t know.”

“What are they about?”

“They apparently want a divorce.”

“...They what?”

“They seem to have been married off for political reasons and ended up with terrible partners. All for the sake of strengthening their family court rank. They cannot voice their wish for a divorce. Apparently, becoming a royal concubine would be a perfect way out, and that’s why they are writing to me.”

“...So what do you think of doing?”

Even for a person not as strict as Ariel, the excuse was at best dubious. No matter how one looked at it, it was obvious that the divorce itself was a pretext used in order to become Rion’s concubine. And only somebody as dense in the matters of male-female relationships as Rion would fall for it.

“I think I’ll leave it to Sol.”

“Ha?”

Sol, having thus far tried to keep silent and unnoticeable in order not to pry too much into a pretty personal conversation, was rather startled by this surprise attack.

“You’re so bold in your duty as that damn geezer’s spy, you may at least be useful to me.”

As ordered by the Knight Commander, Sol had been unfailingly reporting on when and who Rion had been meeting. Young Frey knew this of course, and as far as he was concerned, it was a wasted effort.

“I mean, alright, but what are you trying to make me do?”

“...Recommend those ladies as concubines to His Highness, the Crown Prince.”

Sol, being himself, asked even though Rion’s idea was obvious in hindsight.

“Isn’t His Highness yet to chose his queen though?”

“Tell them to make him hurry up with it. You think I can sleep well with the constant suspicion that he may be plotting to steal Ariel from me somehow?”

Rion allowed himself this joke only because he knew Arnold well by now and was sure the prince would do no such thing.

“Do you really thinking he would do that?”

“Nope.”

“...Jokes aside. It would be difficult for me to intervene in these matters. While this may be unfortunate for the ladies in question, there is the question of what would happen their Houses should their wish be granted?”

“So there was that much gained from those marriages...”

Aristocratic marriages were an extension of politics, very rarely would they be a true union of love. Sometimes, noble children had to marry people they had never actually met. And, naturally, just because the other party came from an influential family didn't mean they were easy to the eye. A legal wife often didn't get that position thanks to the looks, but rather thanks to the political agreement made between her husband's family and her own. That said, it was the norm for aristocrats to be of uncommon beauty in this world. Most of the nobles were either pretty, or just outright stunning to look at. It was just that kind of reality.

“It's my honest belief that one born to an aristocratic family needs to prepare oneself for at least that much.”

“I guess you're right... It's unfair not to help them but I can't think of any other way.”

“Do you really plan to extend financial assistance to the other ones?”

“I do. It might be late for me to think of it now, but, with this, I can repay them for all the troubles I caused them before.”

“...Is that so.”

Sol found this sentiment rather interesting. Rion's words could be interpreted as a wish for a clean break with the past and all its grudges. If that were to be true, the Royal Guard would welcome such a development wholeheartedly. But, somehow, Sol didn't think this was quite what Rion had on his mind.

That intuition was correct.

Rion knew that the war with demons was nearing its end. While the exact ending awaiting Maria was still a mystery, the game would be well and truly over. The moment he had been waiting for all this time was about to arrive. He was still hesitating over what to do with Arnold Grann Flamm. But he saw no reason to abandon his revenge against Erwin, Lancelot, and Maria.

The time for action was coming. He would settle the past scores.



In the meantime, the Kingdom of Gran Flamm had finally finished its preparation for the final battle with the devils. Assembling the troops hadn't taken that long actually, most of the time had been spent on verifying that the enemy really was where it was supposed to be – in the immediate area of the capital. That required an extensive investigation based on Maria's testimony. An invasion route the girl had described had been found and traced back to the devil's stronghold. Rion's conjecture regarding the stronghold's location was tested extensively. Many other places where the enemy headquarters could be conceivably located had been identified and scouted. But, in the end, the devils were found to be holed up where Rion had expected them to be – under the abandoned castle from the Academy days.

Like so, a lot of time had passed and not all concerns about the flaws in the strategy had been put to rest, but there was no other reasonable course of action left. The only way left to learn anything new was to march on the stronghold and do battle there.

So the Royal Council had set the plans in motion.

Fifty thousand soldiers had been assembled, a number dwarfing any previous army sent out to fight the demons. However, more than half of that would be kept back to protect the capital. Although the preexisting invasion route had been discovered and secured thanks to Maria's testimony, the Kingdom wasn't optimistic enough to believe that eliminated the danger. With no soldiers present, there would be no chance to handle an invasion if another, presently unknown, invasion route existed. Even a small number of the fiends infiltrating the capital would lead to mass panic amongst its citizens that would be very difficult to contain. This was why an army outnumbering the horde that was supposed to attack according to Maria was stationed in the city. For that reason, the actual Kingdom's combat force in the upcoming battle would number about twenty thousand. Maria, Arnold, and the Bandeaux Clan Heads were included in that number.

Once ready, the army set off towards the abandoned castle. Many subterranean caverns were identified to exist under that structure, some of them quite large. The Kingdom's planners expected the devil's stronghold to be located there. The basic strategy of the Kingdom assumed dividing the army into smaller squads and a synchronized invasion through all of the identified entrances.

However, things went wrong from the very start.

"Are the scouts not here yet!?"

The officer in charge was the Vice-Commander of the Kingdom's Knights, Frederick Dawson's deputy, and he was in a quite foul mood.

"The ones dispatched to the back of the structure are yet to return, sir."

"...What do we know so far?"

The commander could barely contain his impatience for more information. The army was about to arrive at its destination, the castle should be visible any moment now, and the advanced scouting parties reported demon sightings on the walls of the fortress.

That called for a siege to be established before the underground invasion would start. While the plan didn't consider such an eventuality impossible, it was meant to be very unlikely to happen.

"Their total number is still unknown, sir. The sightings are scarce so far, but it's hard to tell from afar whether it's because there's just not many of them, or if it's because they are just hiding."

"...Looks like we'll have a siege on our hands instead of a simple occupation of an abandoned fort, doesn't it?"

The commander had resigned himself to a siege. He just couldn't expect the demons to roll over after showing themselves in the castle. The situation, honestly, was quite bad. When it came to fighting over fortifications, the defender always had the advantage. Even when the said fortification was long abandoned and in a state of disrepair. Sieges were always a messy, and bloody, affair. And most worryingly, it was hard to imagine how exactly the demons would fight in this situation. It was well established that the devils that commanded them had no regard for their lives. The

commander had a bad feeling about all of this.

“If sir General is really this worried, ought we not attack along the capital’s route instead?”

Arnold noticed the commander’s worries. The Crown Prince was aware that he wasn’t best qualified to meddle in the matters of strategy, but he couldn’t help speaking his mind.

“No, Highness, this might be a ploy to make us do just that. The invasion route found in the capital was very narrow, a large army would struggle to navigate it while under attack. This would create an ideal chance for them to crush us completely.”

While the passages under the abandoned castle weren’t that wide either, there was a lot of them. A simultaneous attack along all of them would force the enemy to divide their forces.

According to the plan, at least.

“...True, that is hard to argue. However, this could be a trap too.”

“It very well may be, Highness. But, at the very least, the scouts report no signs of the demons leaving the castle. I believe the vulnerability of their headquarters from this side is exactly the reason why they have holed up in there.”

“So we are committed to this path?”

“It is easier than punching through a narrow tunnel. The defenders of a fortification might have the advantage in a siege, but it’s the attacker that dictates the pace of the contest. We have time, there is no need to rush.”

The commander had finally recovered from his earlier agitation. He would not have risen to his current position had he not been able to take appropriate action once the circumstances of a situation became clear.

“Send messengers towards the capital! The enemy had sensed our upcoming attack and had assumed a defensive posture. We shall commence a siege and request appropriate equipment be dispatched at once.”

“Sir! Yes, sir!”

On this day, the fuse of the decisive battle was lit. Nobody at that point had expected that the imminent struggle would be of an unprecedented, protracted kind. And that it would be little more than a side-event of the main story.

# Chapter 77

## Event: The Final Battle Part 2

It was early morning in Camargue, and the peace was shattered by a deafening sound of a bell. This sound announced a state of emergency. Not just for the town, though, but for the whole territory, for this peal would be heard far and wide. The bell was not alone in raising the alarm. Emergency smoke signals went up both from the watchtower on the city walls and the sentry posts within the territory. In fact, from the observation post in the castle, one could see smoke rise into the sky as far as the eye could see. Finally, Rion, his eyes focused on the beacons seen in the distance, asked a question.

“...What’s the situation?”

“Lord. Demons. All directions.”

Bravd was there too. He appeared suddenly behind Rion, as he was meant to do, and gave an answer in his customary manner – terse and to the point.

“...So they sealed us off from our neighbors then. Numbers?”

“Varies. Ten to twenty thousand per group. Confirmed by observation.”

“...If they are trying for an encirclement, can we fall back to the mountains?”

Bandeaux was a territory surrounded by mountain ranges. They were mostly impassable, and thus a good barrier against invasion, but not entirely so. Locals had prepared a number of routes among the peaks that were kept secret and in a semi-abandoned state to prevent their discovery by outsiders.

“Shall I investigate?”

“...In what manner are they advancing?”

“All head here. Unhurried.”

"A blockade then. No need for an investigation, we can safely assume they are in the mountains too. Poking around in places where we are awaited is pointless..."

"Lord."

"...Mercury. The units that just returned are to go to Hugh's tower."

"Yes my Lord!"

While Clan Black had been instructed to scout the enemy, Clan Blue had been instructed to gather and guide refugees from the surrounding villages. One of those units could be just seen coming back in the clear morning air.

"Seventy, no eighty thousands... Double, or even triple that if they really are blockading the mountains... How on earth did they..."

Rion had no recollection of ever fighting against this number of demons. He couldn't comprehend just how had they all been transported here. This would require hundreds, if not thousands, of magic circles.

"...I haven't heard this event mentioned at all. That damn woman!"

After trying to keep his anger reined in for all this time, Rion finally erupted. This many demons gathered in one place had to be a part of a major story event. One that Maria obviously had hidden from him.

"Rion, complaining is pointless, is it not?"

"...Ari."

"Let us just do what we can for now, alright?"

"...You're right. We'll do what we can. Bravd, I want you to watch the movements of the demons and monitor the progress of the evacuation. If you think that the evacuees can reach Camargue, let them carry on. If that seems impossible, tell them to go the nearest fort instead."

"If the forts get attacked?"

"...Then try to hold out until relief arrives."

“Lord.”

Before the last syllable faded, Bravd was gone to issue instructions to his subordinates.

“Sol!”

“Lord Frey?”

“I’ll have you work as well.”

“Understood!”

“Request the cooperation from the former soldiers of the Kingdom. Have them organize volunteer militia into teams under their command. They will protect the town for the time being.”

“Eh!?”

Being given a task by Rion excited Sol, but the graveness of the duty stunned him a bit.

“At least until I return.”

“...Return from where?”

“Haven’t you been listening? I need to go rescue those who won’t make it to the town.”

“So that wasn’t an empty promise...”

Sol had understood Rion’s order to Bravd as a measure to prevent panic and give the citizens false hope. This showed that he still didn’t have a perfect grasp on the young man’s personality yet. In a way, he was too chained by his common sense to ever achieve that. In his defense, though, the stopgap solutions of that type were prevalent in emergency situations. Sol, like any other soldier, understood the necessity and didn’t find them out of place.

“Do you really think a platitude like that would fool my people? Anyone who expects that is really underestimating the common man.”

“...It’s a dangerous thing to do.”

“If it could be done safely from behind the walls, I would do it like that.”

“...All the same, you don’t have to go in person.”

“Who do you take me for? I am the feudal lord of Bandeaux. Whose duty it is if not mine? Besides, I am not attempting the impossible. Mercury!”

Having no more patience for idle chatter, Rion forcefully terminated the discussion with Sol and summoned Mercury instead. The situation was urgent.

“Here, My Lord!”

“Prepare my honor guard! We sortie in half an hour!”

“At once!”

“Chronos! Announce highest level of emergency! I permit release of weapon stockpiles! You are to set up the town’s defensive measures!”

“Yes, Milord!”

“Ares! Talos! Until I return you’re in command of escort units! Once all the refugees are within the outer walls, take command of the town’s defense!”

“Understood!” “U-Understood!”

Having been given orders, Rion’s subordinates were leaving the room one after another. Before long, first the castle, then the whole town started preparing for a siege.

A few hours later, everything was ready. Sol was on the city wall, watching the horde fill in the plain in front of the fortification. He estimated that about fifty thousand demons made it to Camargue already, about a fourth of the expected total number. And even this fraction was enough to paint the field black in an unspoken threat to all that dared to watch.

“We’re ready.”

Said Chronos from his side. Sol didn’t know that this youth was the son of Apollo, the Head of Clan Yellow.

“Wait. It’s still too early.”

“But...”

“Patience. We are well prepared, we won’t fall so easily. More than I’d expect you would be able to make us be.”

Sol had taken Rion’s orders to Chronos as a run-of-the-mill preparation for battle, but when he saw the breadth of the subsequent operation, he was absolutely amazed. All those supposedly empty buildings within and outside the walls he had been presented as warehouses for visiting merchants had been a deception. As soon as Chronos had given the order, they had been dismantled one after another, revealing ballistae, various other long-range siege engines, mountains of bows and piles of ammunition. And that wasn’t all. The citizen militia had been issued crossbows, as many as ten thousand of them, raising an unthinkable prospect that civilians would join the fight on the walls. A prospect that had become less outlandish once it had become apparent that those people were moving like trained soldiers, not like amateurs. They clearly had undergone at least the basic training at some point in the past. And that had been the case because, even though Rion didn’t want to drag others into his personal matters, he still wanted them to be able to defend themselves from the fallout. Once again, Sol was taught something by Rion. You had to do things that needed to be done. Sometimes you prepared not because you anticipated trouble, but because not being prepared opened others to a risk.

“Ready the rock lobbers!”

The demons finally entered the effective range and Sol raised his voice. Acknowledgments were shouted back all along the wall.

“...Looose!”

He swung his raised hand down sharply. A heartbeat later rock of all sizes arced through the air and rained down on the attackers.

“Next salvo! Looose!”

And so, the Defense of Camargue, a battle so fierce that it would echo down the generations, started with Sol Aristes’ command.



Meanwhile, in the abandoned castle far from Camargue that was supposed to be the stage of a decisive battle with the demons, a fierce battle was taking place. However, it was of a completely different kind to the one unfolding in Bandeaux. The attackers, the army of the Gran Flamm kingdom, numbered twenty thousand. The defenders, the forces of the devils, numbered two.

“Maria! How are we supposed to beat these things!?”

“That’s something I want to know myself! Why can’t we beat them yet!?”

Her current situation was pretty terrible, and it made her so angry she no longer cared what people around her think.

“This is not working! Retreat at once! Fall back!”

On Arnold’s command, the group that had been fighting until now fell back instantly. The two devils watched them go unperturbed, without giving a chase. They seemed content to stay where they were and keep blocking the route to the depths under the inner keep.

And this scene had repeated many, many times so far.

Back when the order for the assault had finally been given, the army has advanced carefully into the abandoned castle. There was no initial resistance, but the troops remained cautious, wary of an ambush. They didn’t find a single demon on their way to the inner keep. There, the uncomprehending army found the enemy, at last. They were greeted by the former Intelligence Bureau chief, Goran, and one more member of the four great demon generals, Valone of Poison. Only those two were blocking the way, but they were extraordinarily strong. For starters, swords were useless against Goran, as the past encounter in the Royal Castle had proven. There was also that chantless metal attribute magic of his. Normal troops and knights couldn’t put a single scratch on the devil and the Kingdom’s casualties mounted all the while. The other devil general, Valone, was even nastier. True to his name, he was poison incarnate. Just approaching within a certain distance of his person would cause a human to faint, or even die outright. Those soldiers who had unaware approached him first turned into a mound of bodies without even managing to do anything.

With such a situation, the main star of the battle, Maria, took the stage with her party. After all, it was just wrong to have an army fight just two opponents. In such a contest, numbers were more of a hindrance than help. Especially when those huge numbers tried to squeeze into a narrow corridor leading into depths of the castle. That made it very easy for those in the back to not know what was happening to those in the front. Even if the fault was also with the commanders for letting the problem fester for so long. But now, with the hero party on the front line, the battle would finally be won.

Or not.

A month had passed fruitlessly since Maria had first challenged the devil generals. The army, instead of taking part in an epic battle, had sat on its haunches watching a brawl between a half a dozen of individuals or so. The common sense of an armed conflict had long been forgotten in the meantime. The stalemate had been caused by the fact that Maria's trump card, fusion magic, had not been working. It hadn't been ineffective as such, but it couldn't deal lethal damage and was of no help otherwise.

As had been proven in the past, Goran's weakness was a blazing flame that could soften his steel body. But if you failed to deal the finishing blow, no amount of magic would have any lasting effect and his body temperature would eventually return to normal. And with that, so would his toughness. Valone had a weakness too. If you froze him, the poison would be removed from the air around him. So it was quite possible to turn him into an ice statue and defeat him. If Goran wasn't around. They heated up Goran, Valone defrosted from the blaze. They froze Valone, Goran cooled down from the chill.

That was how the previous month passed at the abandoned castle. The hero party would eventually have to take a break with the fight ending in an inconclusive draw. And next morning, they would try again. And again. Such a scene would repeat ad nauseam. All through that month, twenty thousand soldiers – fifty if one counted those defending the capital – had been deployed to the battlefield, but, in a ridiculous twist of fate, only the hero party had been actually fighting. This made the tension of a supposedly final confrontation with the demons to fade from the soldiers' mind. All that remained was weariness. Enough of it in fact, that there were suggestions to just abandon the whole operation and try again. With Viscount Frey in command this time. This had caused Maria's embarrassment to surpass her growing impatience. She was well aware she had slowly been turning into a laughingstock. All that she needed to turn this around was to defeat the devils, of course, but the two enemies just would not cooperate. Goran was the one that needed to be dealt with first, as Valone on his

own was not much of a threat. But, so far, nothing had worked.

Today had been no different. And just as everybody prepared to settle for the day expecting nothing new to happen, something changed for the first time in weeks.

In a completely unexpected way.

“Bravd!? Why are you here!?”

It was Mohit who had noticed Bravd and shouted in surprise. The exclamation was still in the air when the Head of Clan Black collapsed to one knee under the weight of his horrible injuries. Instantly, both heads were surrounded by other alerted clansmen.

“...What happened? What are those wounds?”

Bravd’s appearance alone was enough to tell that whatever had happened, hadn’t been good. Cassius couldn’t hide the anxiety behind his question.

“...Demons... in Bandeaux. Three... hundred thousand.”

“A-Are you for real...”

The totally unexpected news made everyone speechless, starting from Cassius and ending up with the most insignificant of clansmen. And not only them. Arnold, having just finished the latest fight, had noticed the uproar and approached the group.

“How old is this information?”

“...Two... weeks.”

“I see...”

This would mean he had traveled two weeks faster than a usual messenger would, but Bravd didn’t hesitate to reveal this fact and Arnold decided this was not the time to pry into details.

“What is the current situation like there? Guess if you must, I do not mind conjectures.”

“...Impossible... to say, Highness... Lord asks... for relief... The defenders should be...

reaching their limits.”

This was the first time ever other clansmen heard Bravd speak so many words at once. It only reinforced the direness of the situation.

“Highness, permission to depart at once.”

Cassius instantly requested they be allowed to go help, however, from Arnold’s point of view the clansmen asked too much of themselves.

“And what would that accomplish? Five hundred of you against three hundred thousand demons?”

“However...”

“Denied. Dispatch a messenger to the capital at once! Lord General, how many troops can we spare from the defensive duties there?”

A horde of three hundred thousand demons. Arnold couldn’t even imagine the army required to stop that disaster.

“In theory, all thirty thousand. In practice, not a single one, Highness.”

The thirty-thousand-strong army deployed in the city was currently on standby, but they couldn’t just be relieved of their duties. If that created an opening for the demons, the results would be many times worse to what was happening to Bandeaux right now.

“Do you mean we can send no reinforcements?”

“There’s another way, Highness. We leave the troops defending the capital to their duty and go ourselves instead. The attempt to capture this place failed. Whether the army is here or not makes little difference.”

“That does sound like a solution.”

“We may number only twenty thousand, but with Your Highness, the Hero, and other excellencies here, we should be more than a match. Or am I wrong?”

Arnold and the Hero party did possess an overwhelming magic power, and its combat strength had been already proven in past battles. Furthermore, Rion was in Bandeaux

and his magic potential was even stronger than theirs.

“...Wait a moment. How many troops are currently based in Bandeaux?”

And then the prince was struck by a sudden, late worry. Rion had called for help. This meant the situation there was something even he couldn't deal with.

“At the start... of invasion... Three thousand.... Soldiers and militia.”

“...They are facing three hundred thousand with just three thousand of their own? Why would he ever—!?”

“All escape routes... sealed. Civilians... herded to Camargue. No way... to run”

Demons attacking Bandeaux were well organized and coordinated. Rion did his best to save his people and escort them back to the fortress, but those same people now held him hostage inside the walls with their presence.

“...I understand. Let's go back to camp and get ready. We leave for Bandeaux as soon as Father agrees.”

“We mustn't!”

But, even in this situation, somebody objected to Arnold's decision. That somebody was Maria

“...Mustn't? Have you paid no attention?”

“Even if we go for Bandeaux, how long will that take us?”

“Are you telling me to leave all those people because... it may already be late!? How dare you!”

Suddenly Arnold's anger exploded with Maria as the focus.

“I-I didn't say that.”

Maria's face turned ashen. Arnold had never before yelled at her. Actually, Arnold had never before yelled at anybody in public since his childhood days, and only his personal royal guard, Lambert, had ever witnessed him losing his temper.

“Not this!? Then what?! And why did you forget to mention a major assault on Bandeaux?!”

“I didn’t! I wasn’t hiding anything! There was no such event as Bandeaux getting attacked!”

Even though the sight of furious Arnold made her shake like a leaf, Maria was denying fault with all her might. If only because she would likely lose her life had she admitted to any of this. Even without an official recognition, Rion was a part of the royal family, and not disclosing such knowledge would be the same as trying to kill him.

“Why are you hindering me then?!”

“I’m not! Please! Just listen to me! There’s a way to save him even if we don’t go to Bandeaux!”

“...What?”

Rion could be saved. If this were to be true, there was merit in listening to Maria. Arnold reined in his rage instantly.

“We are on top of the enemy headquarters. Once we defeat the devils, their hold over the demons will be broken causing them to either lose the will to fight or escape. You have seen this happening so many times, right?”

Since Arnold had shown signs of willingness to listen, Maria unleashed a rapid deluge of words. Nothing that she had said was new, Arnold had indeed seen that happen in the past. But if it was also true in this case, it would diametrically change the situation.

“You are saying that the demons in Bandeaux will disperse once we capture this stronghold...?”

“Exactly! That’s why we shouldn’t retreat just yet!”

Maria sighed in relief seeing that her words seemed to satisfy the prince. They didn’t satisfy Charlotte, though.

“So how do you plan to defeat them exactly? You had been unsuccessfully fighting them for a whole month now, you know?”

“That’s...”

This question kept the situation unresolved. Undeniably, this wouldn’t have happened if they had been able to defeat the devils as they had been supposed to. That failure kept the assault force stuck in this abandoned castle, and the same failure was the reason why Bandeaux was exposed to such danger now.

“Defeating the devils will make things fine again. This much is certain, right?”

“Eh?”

The unexpected question came from Cassius startling unprepared Maria.

“I heard you say that. That Bandeaux will be saved once we defeat those devils. Is that true?”

“T-That’s right. The devil subjugation will finish with this victory and the world will be saved.”

“I don’t care about the world. I only listened to what you had to say because it could save Bandeaux...”

“...Bandeaux is also a part of this world. It will be saved too.”

“Then that’s what we’ll have to do.”

“You? You can do it!?”

“It’s not a question of being able to or not. “Do what needs to be done.” This was the first thing our Lord had taught us.”

“Don’t say it as if it was so simple.”

But he wasn’t. Rion had also taught the Clan Heads the weight of the words “I’m able to do that.” Neither of them saw the need to pass that understanding to Maria, though. Or even to Arnold for that matter. Only the Clansmen understood the true meaning of Cassius’ words and they had already resolved themselves to defeat those devils.

And so, the Final Battle suddenly became focused on very unexpected characters.

# Chapter 78

## Event: The Final Battle Part 3

As usual, the two Devil generals were lying in wait in the deep paths under the castle keep. There was no surprising them, by some means known only to them those two, they could track all movements of the Kingdom's army. Maria led the way this time, followed by Arnold and Erwin. It had been decided to bet on the future she had promised. The hero herself didn't think much of Clan Heads' chances of defeating the enemy. She would admit the chance was non-zero but having side characters like Cassius defeat the final bosses would turn the game into a farce. She couldn't possibly let that happen.

The fight started with magic arias from Arnold and Erwin with no enemy effort to obstruct the spells. After all this time, the Devils had grown confident that this magic wasn't capable of defeating them. And so it was. Arnold and Erwin's combined effort merely turned Goran's body crimson from the heat instead of melting it. While that made the Steel Devil vulnerable in theory, the presence of Valone made exploiting it untenable. Defeating that monster surrounded by a lethal toxic aura with sword alone was impossible. He had to be frozen. Thus another spell had to be cast, this time by Arnold and Lancelot, since fire and water elements together created ice like Rion had demonstrated. That attack froze Valone, but it was not possible to shatter his body. Goran was in the way and the blast of cold removed aftereffects of the magical fire he had been subjected to. Once again, the situation returned to square one.

In theory, fusion magic was the Devils' weakness, but that weakness was completely negated here. The double act of Goran and Valone had turned the side effects of combination magic to their advantage.

"Hey, if you are going to fight with magic, should I not join in too?"

The truth was that Charlotte had not once taken part in the fight so far since Maria knew no fusion magic that used earth element.

"That would be pointless, right? There's no attack magic that combines with the earth element."

“...Or you cannot use any.”

“What was that?”

“I said you just can’t use any! Or am I wrong!? If you really are the hero of the legends, hurry up and defeat those Devils already!”

Even Charlotte had been greatly unsettled by the news of Bandeaux’s peril. She felt a very strong urge to abandon this battle that didn’t need her and rush alone to Rion. Those feelings threatened to boil over at this very moment.

“HAAAAAAH!”

But the girl’s inner turmoil had been interrupted by a loud and deep war cry that came from Cassius. While the hero party was busy with their ineffective magic, the Head of Clan Red had stripped himself of all armor and raised his sword above his head.

“Attack is the soul of my blade. There is no defending when revenge and enemies await.”

His words sounded almost like a magic chant.

“I am Cassius Rot of Clan Red! A retainer of Rion Frey! I will be your opponent now!”

And then he vanished. An instant later, his sword clashed loudly with Goran’s body.

“Wha-What!?”

Goran exclaimed in surprise. He wasn’t wounded since, to no great surprise, Cassius’ sword failed to penetrate the steel skin. But the attack was unrelenting. Cassius’ sword was a blur that soon changed into a streak of light.

“Y-You bastard!”

And even though the blade couldn’t bite into the flesh, it seems that some damage was still being inflicted. But Valone was nearby, and he was about to interfere continuing the very cooperation that had denied Maria her victory.

“Speed is the soul of my blade. My spirit yearns for swiftness of the wind, and I’ll give my life to live that dream.”

This time, it was Mohit. His words barely faded when one of Valone's hands detached from its owner's body.

"GYAAAAAAAAAH!"

The poison general screamed in pain while his toxic blood gushed onto the stone floor.

"Foolish human! Do you yearn for death that much!?"

The Head of Clan Green moved quick like a gale. He hadn't succumbed to deadly fumes and inflicted an injury on his target. But Valone was poison incarnate. His blood was poison, and being showered in it was like bathing in liquid death. Mohit was not fast enough to avoid the blood.

"...What am I seeing?"

Arnold was dumbfounded by combat abilities displayed by the two Clansmen. He had been fighting along them for a while now, but this was the first time they had shown anything of this caliber. Frankly, their current movements had far surpassed what an ordinary human being could do. It wouldn't be outlandish for someone to call them Devils on the basis of this fight.

"Soul Ignition, I guess?"

Prince's question was answered by the army commander.

"What is that?"

"From what I heard, Highness, it's a technique that utilizes your spiritual force to exceed human limits. I cannot use it myself but Lord Dawson is capable of that feat."

"I never heard of such a thing before. To think they have kept those abilities hidden from me and made no effort to teach me..."

"The technique puts a high burden on one's body, Highness. Seeing them use it in such a manner... Are they going to be fine afterwards, I wonder?"

The answer was a resounding no, which was why Cassius and the others hadn't been using it until now. This technique, a pinnacle of Bandeaux swordsmanship, was considered forbidden. It increased one's power by permanently burning one's mana.

In other words it ignited your strength using the soul as fuel. All four of the original clans knew the technique and, for all four of them, its use was taboo. This, incidentally, was another proof that their swordsmanship shared a common root.

“...No. They are way past being concerned about their wellbeing.”

The burden of the technique was already destroying bodies of Mohit and Cassius. And it was compounded by wounds suffered in the fight. Cassius, still relentless in his attack, had suffered the full brunt of Goran’s magic, steel spikes piercing his torso in many places. At the same time Mohit, his face a mask of pain, was being slowly crippled by poison. His gale-fast dashes becoming noticeably slower with longer and longer intervals in between.

“I guess it’s my turn now.”

Even fighting with their lives on the line, two Clan Heads were not enough to defeat the Devils. By the time everybody arrived at this conclusion, Apollo too decided to join the fray.

“Kiel!”

Without turning back, Apollo called out to the head of Clan Blue.

“...Brother.”

“We will leave Bandeaux, and Lord Rion, in your care!”

“...I hear you.”

Kiel approached Apollo, took the sword out of the scabbard, and presented it to the head of Clan Yellow. The blade gleamed in the torchlight, two sword guards rang having been clashed together. This was a ceremonial oath of two Clan warriors.

“...Strength is the soul of my sword. I seek a blow that brings instant death. For that blow, I will offer my life!”

Unlike the other two, Apollo didn’t move immediately after finishing his chant. He stood, like a statue chiseled from stone, with his sword raised high to the sky. Killing intent gathered around his body like a shimmering haze.

“A retainer of Rion Frey, Apollo Gelb... Will face you on!”

He swung the sword down so hard that it was impossible to follow. Framed by a loud crash, an arc of light raced through the air in the direction of Goran leaving behind afterimages.

“...No... way...”

Goran of Steel fell to the ground sliced neatly into two halves.

“Now is the time! Use your magic!”

Woken out of the stupor by Kiel’s words, Arnold and Lancelot started chanting again. Even Maria joined in this time. With Goran dead, there would be no escape for Valone from the effects of Fusion. His body, the blood gushing from his wounds, his aura – all became ice. And then, pillars of rock erupted from below him crushing the ice block into shards. Valone of Poison was no more.

“...Did that do it?”

“We did it. We managed to defeat the demons! The world is safe now!”

Maria’s jubilant shouts slowly reached the knights and soldiers waiting in the back. Delighted cheers erupted everywhere. The month-long battle was finally over. And even though most of the troops didn’t get to contribute much, it was hard to begrudge them the joy of knowing they would return home safely. Soon the cheers merged into a roar that shook the ground around them giving an illusion of an earthquake. And amidst all that cheering, warriors of Bandeaux mourned, all lined up to offer final prayers to the bodies of Cassius, Mohit, and Apollo laying before them on the rocky floor. Every clansman and each one of those three knew the consequences of breaking the taboo. But knowing didn’t reduce the feeling of loss.

“...I’m sorry... If only I was stronger... If only we managed to defeat the Devils on our own.”

Charlotte too joined in offering her last respects instead of celebrating with the army. She couldn’t stop the tears flowing from her eyes, or feeling vexed by the fact her lack of strength would bring yet more misery to Rion.

“Do not cry for them, please. We have long resolved to die on the battlefield. All the

way back when we left Bandeaux.”

Kiel tried to comfort the crying girl.

“...But Rion will be sad. He will lose someone precious to him again.”

“That’s true. We were told not to die after all. And so, to the very end... they were not able to meet... Lord’s expectations.”

But the old warrior couldn’t endure his tears for any longer either. He understood the regrets of his dead friends better than anyone.

It was true they had prepared themselves to die at first. But Rion’s words had awoken in them a desire to live. They wanted to see even a few more sunrises as Rion’s retainers and they weren’t given even that. Their last words, naming themselves “retainers of Rion Frey”, had been their last act of defiance. They might have never been officially recognized by him but, still, they had wished to die as his men, even if the status had been self-proclaimed. Kiel shared and understood those sentiments better than anybody.

“...Is it really over?”

“Bravd, Brother, what do you mean?”

“Well, I...”

Bravd didn’t know. But there was this vague anxiety in his mind, that tingling of the sixth sense that only someone who had lived his whole life as a spy could develop.

“Lady Charlotte?”

Kiel decided to trust in Bravd’s feelings.

“Is it over? I do not know. Your Highness!”

Kiel’s anxiety spread to Charlotte, and she headed towards Arnold to verify that everything was truly over now. Honestly, she should have gone and asked Maria, but Charlotte had long ago stopped trusting anything the “hero” had said. Having heard Charlotte’s call, Arnold managed somehow to extricate himself from the throng of people congratulating him on the victory.

“...Is there something wrong?”

His face strained at the sight of the fallen Clan Heads and, at this moment, he very much regretted not being able to join the mourning from the start.

“Highness, how do we determine that the war with the Devils had really ended?”

“...Pardon?”

“The ones here are defeated, true. But how can we confirm that the danger to Bandeaux is averted as well?”

“I... A minute, please.”

Charlotte’s question prompted Arnold’s mind to come up with one of his own. This was supposed to be the enemy’s headquarters, but nothing so far confirmed that assumption. There was a worrying lack of proof.

“Highness? Where are the demons? There should be hundreds of thousands of demons here, shouldn’t they?”

And Charlotte arrived at the same thought. There should be a demon army holed up here in the underground. And even now, at this late moment, there were none to be seen.

“...Maria! Where are the demons!?”

“Eh!?”

“Where is the main demon army that you said would be lurking here!?”

“They should be in a large underground cavern beyond those tunnels. We just need to collapse that cavern and bury them! That’s where Miss Charlotte will be of great help!”

“Beyond?! Let’s move!”

“Eh!? Where are you going!? That’s the large demon army, you know!? That’s dangerous!”

Arnold paid Maria’s warnings no mind. The existence of that demon army had to be confirmed at all cost and the Prince moved briskly in the indicated direction.

Only to find a large, empty space. With not one demon in sight.

“...There is nothing here. At all.”

“Not now, Highness. But there used to be a lot of creatures. There is a large number of footprints in the dirt. So many that it’s hard to tell what exactly left them.”

With the area illuminated by Arnold’s magical flame, Kiel could hardly miss the tracks. Or the lingering smell of things that were clearly no longer there. The demons had been here. This had been a staging ground. But now that army relocated somewhere. They could be heading to the capital... But nobody present really believed that. The army that had used to be here was clearly in Bandeaux now.

“A trap. No, a decoy.”

“I fear that it’s likely, Highness...”

“All the time the real target has been Bandeaux... Or rather, Rion. How terribly foolish of me.”

“Our enemy’s strategy was cunning indeed.”

In a bold gambit, the Devils had used their headquarters as a bait. Still, the Kingdom had probably been doomed to fall for that trick.

“In hindsight, it is easy to see through that if you look at the situation from their point of view. Consider their greatest enemy, the greatest obstacle to their ambition... Removing the biggest threat is the obvious move to make.”

“Bandeaux is...”

“We leave for Bandeaux immediately! Whether we make it in time or not is immaterial! We go, now!”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

Arnold’s instructions dashed any lingering feeling of triumph in the army. The knights and soldiers withdrew from the abandoned castle immediately, but it would still take them at best half a month to reach Bandeaux. Nonetheless, there was no choice but go.



At the actual ground zero, under the walls of Camargue, the situation was even direr than Arnold could suspect. All the ammunition for the siege engines had been used up leaving Rion as the sole source of long-range firepower. And while his magic vastly exceeded the potential of any ballista, it was not infinite. Eventually, the demons approached the moat surrounding the castle walls. It was now only a question of time for them to amass enough numbers to overwhelm the defenders that no longer had an answer to Devils' magic. Therefore, Rion ordered his elite units, the honor guard and Sol's squad, to abandon the outer walls and withdraw to the citadel to rest a bit.

This was all in order to prepare for a final gamble, an attempt to break through the sieging hordes. Though it might have been more apt to call the plan a final glorious charge to the death.

But even that perspective didn't prepare the defenders for what came next, for what came was despair itself. A being whose presence alone was enough to trigger all the primal fears and extinguish all will to fight as it waded slowly through the demon hordes.

"...W-What on earth is that thing?"

Not one person could answer this question, not even Rion who asked it. But he felt that if he remained silent, his body and mind would just give up at that moment. The being was not a demon. It was not a Devil either. For all its menace, it was like nothing that walked, flew or swam this earth. It gave off a thoroughly alien feeling. It brought fear. It was something that should not be.

"Is that... the Demon God?"

Rion phrased this as a question, but he was certain this was the case. An existence outside of the norms of this world – the thing in front of their eyes fit that description perfectly.

"A bad ending... Did that woman fail? Or —"

"—did I cause the failure?" He couldn't make himself finish the question, but his body language was betraying his thoughts. His hands wandered to his eyes, and he felt a strong urge to just rip them out of the sockets. Heterochromia was a symbol of

misfortune. After all, what else could bring about this situation?

“Rion... That is not true.”

But Ariel disagreed. She refuted his dark thoughts.

“If nothing changes, everyone will die for sure.”

The Demon God’s resurrection. A bad end for the game. The end of the Kingdom itself.

“You are not responsible for this. And our deaths are not decided yet. You will protect us, all of us, right?”

“Ariel...”

“Your eyes are very beautiful, my husband. I am so glad that I encountered those eyes. And even though it was not all sunshine and rainbows, I am happy that I have met Rion.”

She kept staring straight into his eyes as she was saying those words. Ever since they had met, she had always described his eyes as beautiful and those words had saved his soul so many times.

“Thank you, Ari.”

“Me too!”

“...Mercury?”

“I am also thankful that Lord Rion has come to Bandeaux! My Lord has brought nothing but happiness to our people and I am very grateful for having met milord myself!”

“...T-Thank you.”

Ariel’s words saved Rion again. Mercury’s gave him strength. Rion that fought for his people knew no fear.

“If you plan to head out, I shall come with you. Incidentally, I am also thankful for having met you. Whether you acknowledge me or not, I have lived all this time in order

to become your guard.”

“...Then do as you please. Just don’t regret it later, alright? I cannot possibly say that we can defeat that thing. All that awaits us there is death.”

“What knight would hesitate to put his life on the line? I am a royal guard. It’s far too late for me to feel something like fear.”

“I see. Follow me, my knight.”

“By your will, my liege”

Respectfully, just like a knight would to his liege, Sol paid respects to Rion. Mercury, flustered, immediately imitated the Guardsman and soon after all other royal guards present followed suit.

“My knights! Today we set out to battle the demon god! Do not fear! All you need to do is land a blow!”

““““OHHH!”““““

Rion’s elites braced themselves for the fight with a vigorous shout. All of them were aware that no amount of vigor and resolve would be enough for them to defeat that monster, that god in front of them. Their roles would be shields and sacrifices so that their only hope, Rion, could reach the being.

A battle full of despair awaited.

# Chapter 79

## Ultimately, was it a good or a bad end?

Rion found himself with plenty of time to recall the last-ditch charge as he lay prone on the ground.

It didn't take long for the Demon God to fully come into view. Its existence was a very peculiar one to a human observer, with the exact physical boundaries of its body uncertain and impossible to pin down. At first glance it seemed to have been some sort of a plant, rather than an animal. But you might as well call it a bunch of huge worms interwoven into one black, lustrous colony that lashed around with wormy tentacles. The closest description Rion could come up with was a giant sea anemone with a body of coal tar. People of this world had no good comparison, since they knew neither anemones, nor coal tar. As the being moved around there was a large empty space around it. All the demons that found themselves close to their deity tried the best to get as far away from it as possible. The tentacles didn't discriminate, all that lived seemed to be a good enough sacrifice to consume.

At first, their desperate charge had found it difficult to break through the horde, but pretty soon, when demon at the front ranks had figured out what was happening in the back, they had no longer faced any resistance. It had still been difficult to advance, but only because they had had to move against the flow of fleeing monsters. Eventually, they had made it, they had arrived in front of the monstrous deity.

Only to find themselves be instantly pierced by the tentacles that felt like cold steel and slammed into the ground.

A single attack was enough to dismount and disable Rion's entire army, leaving the men helplessly awaiting their demise on the ground at the Demon God's metaphorical feet. The power was just too overwhelming. It was a god indeed, even if it was a demon deity. No mere human could hope to go against it.

After a while, when severe blood loss started to take its toll, causing his consciousness to fade and vision to go dark, Rion heard a song. He wondered briefly which poor soul lost enough of their sanity to sing in such a situation, but very quickly he understood he was terribly, terribly wrong.

“...Do-Don't... do... it. St... p”

He wanted to scream at the top of his voice, but all he could muster was a hoarse croak. Still, he just had to stop what was happening. He tried to summon all the remaining strength in his body and focus it in his arms to get up from the ground.

“...S-Stop.... A... ri... ,... It's... futile.”

The melodic “song” he had heard was Ariel’s aria. It was a terribly long and complex one and, according to his knowledge, it could only really be one spell. Just as the Clans had their taboo techniques, so did the great Houses of the Kingdom. Windhills passed down the secret of the greatest of healing magics, one that could bring any number of people from the very brink of certain death. His wife was attempting to revive him, and his army. But just like with Soul Ignition, there would be a deadly price to pay for a success.

“...Ariel. Don't do it! Stoooooooooooooooooop!”

She could not hear him. The only reason he could yell at all was the fact that the spell had already been cast and the magic was gradually bringing him back from the death’s door. In time to see the listless body of his wife fall down from the top of the walls.

“...This can't be true! This can't be happening! Aaaghhh!”

Rion’s very heart was gripped by despair. Not only because Ariel died, but also because even with her sacrifice, he still could do nothing against the Demon God. His beloved wife’s death would be in vain.

“Don't fuck with me! Stop fucking with me! Why do you always take everything away from me!!”

Rion raged. But not against the Demon God. He raged against the World itself. After trying to challenge Its will so many times, he had understood the futility, and had grudgingly given up in favor of just waiting until Its plans were concluded. All he had wanted since then had been to bide his time quietly. And he hadn't been allowed even that. The World had pulled him back onto the stage only to plunge him into the depths of the deepest despair. So he loathed that existence that played with his life. Rion loathed the World. And he raged.

“Why can't you give me something for once?! Haven't I come from the other world

too?! Shouldn't people like me be granted a boon!? Are you listening, God!? Because if you are, GRANT ME POWER!!”

It was a thoughtless tirade born from desperation. A mindless rant, a tantrum of a child no longer able to contain its petty grievances. He hoped for nothing. and yet—

“You desire power?”

“...Eh?”

—he heard a voice out of a sudden. He turned in the direction it came from and saw a lady that somehow resembled Ariel. She was beautiful like a doll and expressionless like one.

“Your words just now... You desire power?”

“...I do.”

“I can grant you power. As long as you do as I tell you.”

“...Are you Diane?”

The lady somehow reminded him of his water spirit. He thought that if Diane ever took a humanlike shape, it would look like this.

“...Close to the truth, I guess?”

“Sarah?”

If this wasn't Diane, then it must have been Sarah, the spirit of fire. Only those two had always been by Rion's side.

“That's about just as close!”

“Eh? But there's no ot... Rufii?”

Rion, confused, tried the name of Ariel's companion.

“Still not there. I'm a little different from them all. Let me give you a hint.”

“A hint?”

“I am Diane, in a way. But I am also Sarah. And Rufi too. And one other not given a name. Who do you think I can be?”

That hint was plenty enough. If she was all the founding elements of the world itself, there was only one thing that came to mind.

“...Y-You are...”

Rion’s face turned as pale as when he had seen the Demon God for the first time. What stood before him was an existence he loathed and feared the most. The World itself.

“You understand now, I see. But this kind of face on our long-awaited meeting... I don’t really like it, you know?”

“S-Screw you! Why would the World even manifest itself here! And with such an appearance!”

“...I don’t really being yelled at either. You summoned me personally. Aren’t you being rather rude?”

“I called you?”

“You desire strength, do you not?”

“...So that’s how it is.”

He yelled out of desperation, and the World deigned to answer. This, to Rion, was an insult. Especially considering who made the situation that desperate in the first place. He would never accept such a ridiculous outcome. He’d rather die than follow Her whims.

“Hmm... That woman is still alive, you know?”

“W-What?”

But the World saw through his thoughts effortlessly, and had an answer. Ariel.

“The spirits love her very much, you know. So much, that they refused to obey her

command in full and cushioned her fall. That kept her alive. Not a big task for the wind attribute, but still.”

“...Ariel is alive.”

This was a really welcome news. But, at the same time, that turned Ariel into a hostage. If he didn't cooperate now, the Demon God would kill her. He figured this must have been the main reason the World mentioned this.

“And that's not the end of the good news! That woman is with a child. Whose child may it be, I wonder?”

“A-a c-child?”

There was not a sliver of doubt in Rion's mind, the child was obviously his. Yet another chain to bind his free will.

“That heartfelt promise to die together the two of you made... Does it include the child, I wonder? It's not like it could agree with your oath not even being born yet, right?”

“...You vile, wretched—”

“You DO desire power, right? I would be rather upset if I manifested here for nothing, you know?”

And now a veiled threat. She wanted him to make a request of Her. And Rion knew well enough She would not give power out of goodness of Her heart.

“...I do.”

Ultimately, there was no other way for him.

“Perrrfect! I shall grant your desire. And in return...”

“In return, what?”

“You must offer everything to me. I want your EVERYTHING.”

“...W-What?”

From the receiving end, this sounded almost like a twisted love confession. Rion heard the words, but didn't understand.

"Didn't you hear? I want your everything."

"...You want my life in sacrifice?"

"Nooo. Even if that's one way to put it, I guess. After all, I am something like a god."

Such a lighthearted god She was. But if she was the World itself, it made her pretty much the same thing.

"A sacrifice, huh..."

"If you refuse, that woman will die. That unborn, unformed child in her womb will die. And all those pitiful worms begging for help behind you will die too."

"Ah..."

He suddenly realized his decision didn't impact only on him and Ariel. If the Demon God was left to its own devices, whole Bandeaux would share their fate. The weight of chains binding down Rion grew manifold.

"So? What will you do? Will you become wholly mine?"

"...Fine."

"Suuuch an ambiguous answer! Say it properly. Say you belong to me."

"..."

"Say. It. Or are you going to let them all die?"

Her cheerful mood was snuffed out in an instant. The threat was open now and the pressure was sending chills down his spine. Any other man would be on his knees already.

"...I am... yours."

"Yes! It was spoken! You're bound to me now, alright? Break this promise, and there

will be harsh consequences.”

“...I don’t plan to. I’ll do as you say. Give me power already.”

There was no time to leisurely ponder future consequences. Defeating the Demon God came first and couldn’t wait.

“You have to formally become my property first.”

“...Then hurry up with it!”

“Okaaay. How should I do it, I wonder? I like those flames of revenge but the water of intellect seems nice too. Such a hard choice... I guess I should go with the gentle blue after all.”

“Gu... a... augh...”

Just as Rion was wondering what was this all about, an intense piercing pain struck his right eye. Just as if someone tried to pry it out with a crowbar.

“Milord!”

Sol, Mercury, and the rest of Rion’s retinue had been completely lost in the situation thus far, but seeing their lord in pain, they immediately attempted to rush over.

“Don’t! Another step and he dies!”

This was a perfect villainous line, She couldn’t deliver it better if She tried.

“Not that I really mind killing you all first.”

This particular threat was aimed both at the group and Rion himself. Rion understood that instantly so he motioned to his men to back off.

“You sure are resilient though. I personally think it’s fine to scream when your eye is being gouged out, you know? But that aside, thank you for the meal.”

Having said that, She plopped Rion’s bloody right eye into Her mouth and started to chew on it happily.

“Mmmmm. Very warm. To think it would be this warm despite its affinity for water. Very nice flavor too... Hah, kidding! Don’t look at me like that. I’m not like that senile old fart from the sticks that takes pleasure in consuming flesh.”

“...Senile... Is that about the ancient god from the far south?”

Her words prompted Rion to recall the story he had heard from Olivia about the sacrifices offered to an ancient god.

“He’s a senile old man, you hear me? Now then. I’ve given you an eye back. You can go defeat the god of the devils now.”

“Eh?”

“I have returned an eye to you. You can see, can’t you?”

Rion now noticed that the pain originating from his right eye socket was fading away. He experimentally closed his left eye and, indeed, he could see without any problems.

“...I do. But aren’t you supposed to be the one to defeat it?”

“Me? But why? YOU desired power. YOU should be the one to defeat it. I just gave you what you wanted.”

Her words were certainly reasonable, even if not very satisfying. Rion began to muster his willpower for another attempt. But first, he had to learn what power did She grant him.

“...What kind of power did you give me?”

“When you look through your right eye, you can see all four spirits, right?”

He certainly did. He saw Sarah and Diane, a third spirit he knew to be Ruffi, and one more that must have been the spirit of earth.

“Oh, you’re right... Wait, no!”

“No what? Oh, was that a comedy skit perhaps? Oh my, how interesting.”

“Screw you! Like the Demon God can be defeated with just the four elements!”

Rion had already tried the combination magic, both his own and by joining forces with Ariel. If that had been enough to deal with that monstrous deity, he wouldn't have to charge out in the first place.

"It absolutely can though?"

"Then you go and do it!"

"Not happening. With the amount of power I have left I can barely manage to grow hair on a Villager A somewhere."

"...You what? Aren't you the World?"

"And how do you imagine containing the entire World's worth of power in this tiny, cute body of mine? I've brought over what I could fit."

"What happened to the rest?"

"Discarded."

"...Are you actually stupid?"

Even Rion couldn't contextualize just how much strength something like a World would have, but he was sure it wasn't an amount you'd just throw away without a second thought. He just couldn't understand how this woman could cast it aside so easily.

"Soo cruel! And here I went making this body just for you..."

"...I don't get you at all. Why would you do such a thing?"

"Eh? Didn't you hear me? I said that I want you, right? I love you, stupid. Ahhh! I said it!"

For the first time in this conversation, the doll made a vaguely humanlike expression. But it was not the best moment to marvel at that.

"Y-You... love me?"

"Sigh. You're same as always, even faced with someone's confession. Now I can really

understand the ladies who lament how dense you can be.”

“Slow down. What do you mean? What are you even talking about?”

While it was true Rion could be oblivious in the matters of love, was there really a chance for him to understand this particular Worl... maiden’s heart?

“I’ve always been watching over you, the irregular, you know? At first, I just wanted to keep tabs on whatever was it you were trying to do at any moment.”

“Always...”

This meant that She had known all his plans from the start as he had been developing them. He had always known that in the depths of his mind, but hearing that he said out loud made him feel quite pathetic.

“But watching you struggle made me really excited. You have never given up no matter how impossible the task seemed to be. Looking at you as you earnestly work hard was really endearing. But still, I had my duty to protect the established storyline.”

“You sure did that.”

She had a “duty”. That meant even the World itself was bound by the rules of the game. Not that this knowledge raised any sympathy in Rions.

“And you... You even fought me! You fought the World itself for those important to you. Has there ever been a human like that? I don’t think anyone else, even a reincarnator, would be able to resolve themselves to do something like that when they were not even given any power.”

“...Is that so?”

“I’m convinced. And that’s why I started thinking that you were the genuine protagonist. That you deserve to be the protagonist much more than a certain stupid woman who couldn’t even follow a script.”

“That’s...”

But wouldn’t that be against her supposed duty? This explanation only made Rion feel more confused.

“But as long as I was the World, I couldn’t do that. So I had to wait until the game releases its hold on me. Only then would I be able to throw away my role and live my life with you like I decided to. The time is here. I will make you the protagonist of your own saga and I will be your heroine. How do you like that? Doesn’t that sound wonderful?”

“...You really are stupid.”

Well, it would be more correct to call Her a woman madly in love, and not even the first one ever that fell for Rion so hard. But none of the past ones had quite the same magnitude of sheer power.

“I’m not. You’re being horrible, you know? I even went through the trouble of assuming the type of appearance you like. It’s vexing to have to model myself on that woman. See? I have even made my eyes slanted. Don’t I look cute?”

“...Ariel is way cuter.”

“Don’t say that ever again. You promised to give yourself to me. So forget that woman and devote your body, your whole self to me and me only.”

“Only after the Demon God is defeated.”

“So go do it already, slowpoke!... Fine. I see there’s no helping it, I’ll have to do you a special favor. But that’s one time only, you know?”

She moved her hand as if conducting an orchestra.

“Wha—!?”

Suddenly, all the Demon God tentacles that tried to creep in unnoticed behind Her froze mid-movement without ever reaching Her body.

“Tsk, ts. To think that a good for nothing like you would be able to understand this world’s language. Trying to attack me right after learning about my limited strength... Such a shameless little god you are. Honestly, how could a greenhorn like you ever think of replacing me?”

The Demon God did understand the language. It had initially been keeping its distance, wary of the new arrival, but found itself duped by the World. Furious, it emitted a deep,

ear-shattering, bass roar.

“Now then, my love, lecture time. As you know, by manipulating the heat with fire attribute, you can freeze summoned water and create ice. It’s quite amazing that you were able to think of that on your own.”

All the tentacles suddenly froze. Not for long though, the Demon God suddenly flexed them, shattering the ice and renewed its attack with more vigor. The World avoided it with ease.

“But ice isn’t special because of its hardness or sharpness. After all, Earth is better at both.”

She continued her lecture while freezing the tentacles again and again.

“What makes it special then? Its temperature.”

Suddenly a gust of wind roared in the area. This too was the World’s magic. The awakened gale picked up the shattered ice fragments and carried them upwards. Immediately, the air turned colder and the sky clouded. It started to snow. Snow turned to blizzard.

“All that lives needs warmth. When the temperature drops, living things become duller. Drop it enough, they will cease to act altogether, or even die. This is world’s, this is my basic principle.”

It was obvious, for each organism there was a minimum temperature below which it would not survive.

“Do you know how to do it now? I can give you one more hint if you don’t. That abomination was trying to create a world with different four elements at its core. One that revolves around steel, money, poison, and darkness. Do you understand what would that lead to? What kind of chaos it would bring here? Such an ugly world it would be.”

But Rion didn’t hear Her last words. The first hints were enough and his attention was fully on the upcoming fight now.

“...Yes, I can see how to go about it now. Diane, Ruffi.”

Answering Rion's command, both spirits livened up. Water droplets started to divide into smaller and smaller parts. Wind coiled about in the sky. A tornado, no, something more complex than a simple storm cell appeared above the Demon God. Soon after, a dazzling light crashed down from the sky followed by a thunderous roar.

"...You divide small drops of water and let them be carried by the wind. Static electricity gathers, and once there's enough of it, you get lightning."

"Steel is weak to electricity, right?"

"As I thought, I will never be bored with you. What kind of things are you going to show me next, I wonder?"

"There's no need for more. Its primary element is steel and that determines its biggest weakness. Just to be sure, I should hit its poison aspect too, but all the required tools for that are already gathered."

Vigor returned to Rion's voice. Finally finding a way to win allowed him to regain some of his zest.

"I like this cool side of you too, you know. I'll make a special effort to help you. We need to attack simultaneously to land a fatal blow anyway."

"...With the power of making hair grow on random citizens?"

He had regained his capacity for sarcasm too.

"Shush. A girl mustn't brag needlessly."

"...Do what you want."

"Of course I will. Now then, let's start! This will be our first time working together!"

Rion had never thought he would end up fighting alongside the enemy he needed to defeat the most. If this was Her plan from the beginning, then he got perfectly caught in the scheme. In the end, he just couldn't defeat the World while the game was in effect, which was exactly why she used her trump card before the scenario concluded. But even if he ended up being bested by Her, even if She succeeded in Her unbelievable aim of obtaining him, Rion still considered the outcome fine if by doing so he managed to protect Ariel. He might have lost to the World, but this time at least he managed to

protect those important to him, and that was, in his mind, something to be content about.



A considerable time had passed since the sky stopped falling and the reverberating thunderclaps stopped rumbling in the sky. Judging the battle to be over, the citizens of Camargue timidly left their shelters. But outside, there was no sign of the victors awaiting them. Many of the townsfolk climbed the walls, anxiously looking for a clue about what had happened.

All they saw outside were the plains of Bandeaux bristling with countless corpses of demons as far as the eye could see. The fight with the Demon God that came to Bandeaux had ended, and thus the true decisive battle was thus concluded. And only one person, the single knight remaining on the field, knew the truth of what had happened. A certain Sol Aristes.

# 【 The Game – Epilogue 】

# Chapter 80

## The Resolve of Sol Aristes

Arnold and the army had marched to Bandeaux with all haste but, as expected, they couldn't make it in time. They barely covered half the distance when they received the news of the battle's end. The tidings were dire. Most of the combatants were supposed to have died in the fight and, once the more detailed information arrived, it became clear that Rion was also among the casualties. Nevertheless, Prince Arnold didn't abandon his journey. He continued heading towards Camargue, albeit with a more limited retinue. He was worried about Ariel who somehow survived the ordeal and just couldn't find it in himself to believe that Rion was truly dead. On the way there, he was joined by the Knight Commander. Frederick had left his subordinates behind and traveled alone in order to catch up to the Prince and request that he returns to the capital for now. Arnold refused vehemently. Eventually, the party reached their destination and were welcomed in Camargue castle by Sol Aristes.

"...Good work, young man."

Since Arnold couldn't think of a good way to start the conversation, Frederick was the first person to speak.

"To think that Commander would also come..."

"It was a convenient opportunity for me. Given how busy the Royal Guard is with recent events, being temporarily tasked with this duty is almost like having some time off. "

This was a lie. The King had thought that not being able to send a suitable envoy to Bandeaux would make the situation more difficult. He had chosen the Knight Commander personally.

"But let us not dawdle. I want to know everything that has happened here. Gather everyone who may have something useful to say."

Social pleasantries could wait. Frederick decided that he needed to learn everything he could about the recent battle and the current situation of the barony. Deciding on

future steps without that information would be difficult.

“I can tell you everything you want to know by myself, sir.”

“Mhm? Can you really explain everything?”

“I do, sir. In fact, there’s isn’t anyone else who could do that.”

“...What about Lady Ariel?”

“She... survived.”

The way Sol said this implied this in itself was nothing short of a miracle, a fact that didn’t escape Frederick’s attention.

“...Is that so. Well then, we’ll have to count on you in that case.”

“By all means, sir. This may take a while, though. Let us find a room we can settle in comfortably.”

Sol guided them to a rather large conference room but, despite the size, only the important people were allowed inside. Once everybody was seated, Sol began to recount the events of the recent weeks.

As soon as Rion discovered the large demon horde, he ordered, and started assisting with, a general evacuation of the fief. He had his honor guard go to all the villages to guide the population either to Camargue or to a nearby fort. This way those that were too far to reach the city in time still had some protection in the countryside. It was better than having them left to their own fate in their houses.

Incidentally, Sol didn’t mention anything about how Clan Black was sent in all directions for intelligence gathering. The existence of that clan was not something, in his opinion, that Arnold and the wider public needed to know. Their achievements in finding the enemy, estimating their number, keeping track of their movements, and monitoring the progress of the evacuation remained a secret, even though it was crucial for Rion’s ability to formulate a plan.

Sol told his audience about how he was entrusted with the defense of the city while Rion sortied out of the fortress with his elite Beast Cavalry. He stressed that this raid was not meant to just fight the demons, but to rescue the villagers waiting in

countryside forts. They would attack any demons sieging those strongpoints and guide rescued people either back to Camargue or completely out of the territory.

When rescue or escape was deemed impossible, the people inside the forts would be ordered to wait for another chance. Rion would move like this from one fort to another, circling his territory many times as he tried to rescue those still under threat.

The Devils were snapping at his heels at all times while he was doing this. Their intention was probably to exhaust him with the multitude of skirmishes and rescue attempts, but the freedom with which Rion managed to move across his territory almost made it look like he was toying with his pursuers.

“Wait a second. Devils?”

Frederick interrupted the tale with a question.

“Yes, sir. Two. Leading that many demons must have been too taxing on just one.”

“What did they call themselves?”

“I do not know. It is likely that Lord Rion didn’t either. Knowing him, he would take any attempt at introduction as an opening to fire a spell or swing his sword.”

“...That sure does sound like him.”

He indeed was the type to end the fight without even asking for the name of the enemy. But the number of the Devils involved, two, was a strong enough suggestion of what kind of enemy they were – they belonged to the Four Generals like Goran and Valone. It had been thought that the other two had perished during the initial battles with the demons. This was clearly not true.

“I shall continue now, if I may.”

Seeing they were being played with, the Devils changed their approach. They discarded the petty tricks employed thus far and decided to force the issue with numbers instead. All the demons that appeared in and around Bandeaux had started to converge on Camargue. The enemy horde was estimated at three hundred thousand at that moment. This was when Rion decided to request reinforcements because the number of demons kept steadily increasing. They waited until the monsters showed an opening that would allow a person to sneak out, and Bravd was sent with a

message.

“...What were the final numbers?”

“I do not know. Once the count reached five hundred thousand, no one felt like continuing any more.”

There was also a more prosaic problem. Accurately counting small enemy bands was easy, estimating numbers in groups of several thousand to several dozens of thousands was possible. Trying to count a sea of half a million heads to any degree of precision was a fool’s errand.

“...Please continue.”

“Sir.”

Once the horde focused on Camargue, Rion had no choice but desperately defend the city, making the Devils’ new tactical approach a success. A forced defensive battle deprived Rion of mobility and any chance of launching surprise attacks.

And the resulting siege could only be described as hell.

The large amounts of missiles and siege engine ammunition gathered inside the fortress was exhausted in what felt like a blink of an eye. Having no chance to recover spent ammo from the field, the defenders were limited to dismantling buildings and storehouses for bricks and stones. Still, lack of ammo for bows and crossbows reduced the firepower of the fortress greatly.

All that remained were Rion’s and Ariel’s spells for as long as the couple still had mana. Once they run out, it was brutal hand-to-hand combat while they rested to recover. The only silver lining was that the enemy was just too numerous. There was simply not enough space for all of them to attack the walls at once and the defenders never fought more than fifty thousand at once. This would be not that different from any other normal battle, if not for the fact that there was no time to rest for the common soldiers.

“...No time to rest?”

“It appears that the demons don’t need to sleep, sir. And even if they did, there was enough of them to just constantly rotate in fresh troops.”

“...How many days are we talking about?”

“I cannot remember. We were ordered not to count because that would only make us more tired.”

“It’s not like something like that could actually help, don’t you think?”

“Of course. The only reason that the Camargue did not fall was that it was extremely well prepared. Allow me to omit the details of how or why. If anyone present is curious, you are free to look into it on your own later.”

Camargue’s present defensive strength vastly exceeded the simple fortress city it had been in the past. The moat system had been deepened and expanded, outer walls reinforced, and surrounding terrain landscaped to make it more hostile to a sieging army. Sol refused to go into details because he would have to explain what was the reason behind all this work.

“...Fair enough. What happened then?”

The Knight Commander didn’t need the reason, he had already known them. But he really wanted to learn what had happened afterward. Given how desperate a situation Sol described, the climax of the battle must have been close. But that conclusion was premature, there was still a lot of the story to tell. A whole lot of a certain Demon God.

“Eventually, we defeated the Devils. But they used their deaths to resurrect the Demon God.”

“Stop! What did you just say!?”

This news flustered Frederick greatly, making him doubt his ears.

“The god of the demons appeared on the battlefield. Please do not ask if I’m sure. The existence in front of my eyes was so strange and alien, that it must have been the Demon God”

“...Your Highness?”

Arnold only shook his head. He had no answers for the Knight Commander. All that Maria had told them that the resurrection of that deity spelled the end of the world.

“Was that really the Demon God?”

The Crown Prince wasn't really doubting Sol's words, he just lacked a better question at the moment.

“We cannot know for certain, Highness, after all, no one knows what a real Demon God is like. We are basing our assumption on Lord Rion's guess.”

“A guess?”

“It was based on the Devils and their sudden strange behavior. For most of the battle, they have been staying out of the harm's way behind the bulk of their minions, but at a certain point in time, they suddenly charged to the front lines. As if looking for death.”

“...And?”

Arnold suddenly thought that the same could be said about the two enemies under the abandoned castle, who had suddenly abandoned all caution.

“Lord Rion suspected that they were trying to get killed on purpose. He thought that the devils had offered themselves as a sacrifice for the revival of their god.”

“What...?”

“According to the Lord, the devils must have grown agitated by the attack on their headquarters. That place was probably some sort of consecrated ground, so they couldn't abandon it since they didn't amass enough sacrifices to achieve their goal.”

“Ceremonial Place... How did he know?”

“He didn't, Highness, all this was a mere hypothesis. However, it would explain the events. The devils, having not yet given up on reviving the demon god, make one last gamble and sacrifice themselves to make up for what the ritual was lacking. Especially since they failed to get the local population.”

Rion had had no right to know this all, of course, he hadn't even known about the battle under the abandoned castle and how it developed. Sol could volunteer this information now because they had asked somebody who knew everything. The World.

“The devils attacked Bandeaux intending to use it for the Demon God’s revival...”

That, and to remove their greatest enemy, Rion. But Sol didn’t mention that since it would go against his Lord’s wish.

“And their plan succeeded. Well, partly succeeded, I guess?”

“Partly?”

“I believe the Demon God was not properly resurrected. That’s why we were able to kill it.”

“...How did Rion achieve that?”

“He detonated his mana reserves.”

“He what?”

“I’m guessing, Highness. Suddenly, we heard a large thunderclap and a tremendous explosion occurred near the Demon God. We had been buffeted by a strong shockwave and, when things calmed down, neither Rion nor the Demon God could be found.”

“...I see.”

So that was how Rion had died. Arnold had already seen this description in early reports, but hearing it from Sol’s mouth was still a shock. The Prince, like many other people, had still harbored some hope that Rion had been able to make it out alive somehow.

“...And you survived safe and sound, eh?”

With the Prince brooding over the death of his brother, the Knight Commander took over the reins of questioning again.

“Lord Rion ordered me to withdraw from the fight to save Lady Ariel. We were on death’s door after our first assault on the Demon God and she apparently used a very dangerous spell to bring us back to health.”

“W-What!?”

Arnold exclaimed in horror. He, as a royal, knew what the forbidden magic was and what dangers it carried.

“Lady just fainted from the exertion, Highness. Her life is in no danger.”

“I-Is that so.”

“And that concludes my report. The remaining demons fled the battle scene in all directions and we were unable to defeat them. Given the extremely high numbers, I believe the danger to the neighboring territories might be considerable and should be addressed.”

“True. I’ll make arrangements.”

The Knight Commander saw the wisdom in Sol’s words. He gave a meaningful glance to a subordinate sitting at the table. The man understood the order. Royal Guard would soon be deployed to deal with marauding demons.

“Can I meet with Ariel?”

Having heard about the forbidden spell and Rion’s, Arnold was concerned about his former fiancée as much as he had been about Rion, if not more. He expected her to be feeling terribly depressed.

“It is not possible, Highness.”

“What?”

The reply was unexpected, Arnold didn’t think he would be refused.

“Lady Ariel is feeling very miserable right now, we have barely managed to stop her thinking of death. Does this help you understand why, Highness?”

“It does. But that is exactly why I am worried and want to see her.”

“Excuse my bluntness, Highness. Do you really think your visit will improve her mood?”

“Sol! How dare you?! And you call yourself a Royal Guard!?”

Lambert, the Prince’s bodyguard snapped. This kind of behavior was inexcusable from

one of their own.

“I wish to retire from the Guard. Immediately, if possible.”

“W-What!? Do you think such a selfish request will be accepted?”

“You call it that, but I no longer have an assigned charge. It’s not as though my retirement would cause trouble to anyone.”

Sol didn’t show any signs of wilting under Lambert’s verbal assault or willing to change his mind.

“What are you going to do after retiring?”

Asked Frederick.

“For the time being, I will lend my strength to the cause of Bandeaux’ revival.”

“A different lord will be sent to govern this place. Are you going to serve him when he comes?”

“No. I believe my aim achievable without that.”

“I see... Don’t take this as me agreeing yet, though.”

Frederick valued Sol’s abilities highly and couldn’t make himself let the man go just like that. However, he had other reasons too.

“I won’t change my mind, sir.”

“Don’t say that just yet. Your Highness, would you be kind enough to announce the meeting over? I wish to have a private chat with knight Aristes.”

“...Good idea. I was thinking of taking a break just about now too. This meeting is over gentlemen.”

Arnold actually needed time to sort his feelings out and was about to suspend the questioning anyway.

“I suggest we reconvene in four hours. Sol and I shall remain here to discuss private

matters.”

“So be it. We will leave you to it.”

Arnold didn’t really have any particular place on his mind to go to, but he understood enough to know he couldn’t stay here. Everybody apart from the Knight Commander and Sol left the chamber.

“...I really won’t change my mind about retiring, sir.”

“I know. But I have a question I need to ask before I let you go.”

“A question, sir?”

“What are you hiding?”

Sol suddenly felt full brunt of Frederick’s piercing glare. The pressure was comparable to having the old man draw a sword on him.

“...I am hiding nothing, sir.”

He withstood that pressure without breaking a sweat.

“Lies. I can see through you easily. You ought to learn more from Viscount Frey about hiding your intentions.”

“Sir?”

“It’s the way you spoke about Lady Ariel. You prioritized her wellbeing over the will of the Crown Prince. Are you planning to serve the Viscountess?”

Sol’s behavior implied that his loyalty lied not with Arnold, as it should, but with Ariel. Coupled with the fact he requested to be allowed to retire, there was only one possible conclusion.

“...She is Lord Rion’s wife, and I am thinking of serving her. Is there really anything strange about that?”

“Mhm. A very plausible excuse. Let’s see if you have one for this question too...”

“...Yes?”

Sol's wariness increased even more.

“How did you stop Ariel from taking her life?”

“I...”

“The two of them have pretty much lived a shared existence. I find it really unnatural for Lady Ariel to choose to continue living after losing Rion. And don't try trying to pretend you convinced her, we both know no arguments would ever persuade her.”

“ ... ”

Having his answer rejected before it was spoken caused Sol to remain silent.

“Can you really protect it? Is it something a lone man like you, one who aimed to be a swordsman, can protect? Are you really going to carry all that burden alone?”

Seeing Sol shaken, Frederick pressed on with his words.

“I...”

“Think of what's important to you. Viscount Frey was able to do that. He was a man who could discard anything as long as it was necessary for protecting that thing. He could be rather extreme in his single-mindedness. This was his strength. What's the most important thing to you?”

“...To protect Lady Ariel, sir.”

“From what?”

“...From the Kingdom of Gran Flamm.”

“What...?”

This was one answer Frederick didn't expect.

“I must protect my Lady from all of this country's malice. That was Lord Rion's first and last order to me.”

Sol recalled Rion's exact words, they were different from what he told to Knight Commander. "If you really think of me as your lord, then hear my last order. Become my soon-to-be-born child's guard and protect him. Don't let my child suffer the same fate as I did. This will be my first and my last order to you as your lord." Sol had taken this order to heart. His new lord and charge would be the unborn child Ariel carried and he felt a very strong devotion to this duty. He would make sure this infant would be born safely. He would not lose a master ever again.

"Sol! Commander! Please come with me!"

The discussion was interrupted by a flustered Lambert barging into the room.

"What happened!?"

"The Crown Prince is surrounded by armed maids! They threaten to kill him!"

"Why did you let that happen!?"

"His Highness forbade me from intervening. It seems this came as a result of him trying to meet the Viscountess."

"What!? Why would his Highness—!?"

Sol was greatly surprised by Arnold's actions and dashed out of the room. Frederick and Lambert followed suit.

# Chapter 81

## The Resolve Of Charlotte Lanchester

The situation had calmed down by the time Sol reached Ariel's chambers. The Warrior Maids and the Royal Guard were still glaring at each other in a standoff, but at least the blades had been sheathed.

Seeing Arnold, the person who had stirred all this trouble, try to calm things down now irked Sol quite a bit.

"Please, all of you, you misunderstand. I had no untoward intentions. But when I saw that the atmosphere in front of Lady Frey's rooms was this serious, my curiosity was piqued."

"Shameless! What can possibly be oddly strict about guards protecting the chambers of their mistress?!"

Venus was, as always, rather impertinent, and, as always, she didn't really care. Her attitude was making Arnold's guards rather angry.

"Well, I do not disagree miss, but..."

Arnold didn't know who all those armed women were. No wonder, the girls calling themselves 'Warrior Maids' were self-appointed guards after all.

"No buts! Having a man shameless enough to seek entry to the private rooms of a married woman go through those doors is out of the question! Regardless of who he may be."

She was right of course, and she had a point. If only she wasn't addressing a Crown Prince, or rather, if only she wasn't speaking in that particular impertinent tone.

"...How is Ariel doing?"

"We don't have to tell you that."

She shot down Arnold's question without much ceremony, infuriating the Royal Guards all the more.

"Mind yourself, woman! Shall we cut you down here and now?!" yelled one that could no longer contain his anger.

"Just try it! All you do is run from the demons and pick on the weak! Some Royal Guards you are!" retorted Venus in a rather inflammatory manner.

"You what?! When did I ever run away from the demons?!"

"When did you ever fight them?! Not a single person came to help us when we needed help!"

"That..."

Blaming those guardsmen was unreasonable. They had their own battles to fight and they had never given up on Bandeaux even when they understood they might come too late.

But there were no other outsiders around, nobody else to vent the grief.

"Miss Venus, that was pretty unfair."

"...Sir Sol."

Seeing Sol's face, the girl regained some of her composure.

"They have been fighting elsewhere, yet still made all haste here to help. You must recognize that."

"I know..."

"Your Highness," said Sol bowing his head to Arnold, "please forgive her brashness."

"It is fine, I understand. Still, is Ariel really alright? Why is she guarded this strictly?"

"She is in fine health, Highness. But her spirit suffered greatly from recent events so we are letting her rest undisturbed."

“Could I have a glimpse of her face at least? Even a peek through the door will do.”

Arnold’s worries were not laid to rest by Sol’s words. There was just too much determination all around to keep him out of that room.

“...Highness, you are talking about a married woman’s bedchambers. How would that look?”

“Which is why I shall visit Lady Frey in your stead, Highness.”

“Eh?”

The female voice that asked the question out of the blue belonged to Charlotte and Sol was ruing the fact he had forgotten she was here too.

“There is nothing wrong with having another noble lady such as me paying a visit, is there?”

“No, however... Viscountess really needs to rest, and...”

“I shan’t take long. I want to help, even if just a bit, and there is nothing else I can do for Rion now...”

It might not have reached the depths of Ariel’s suffering but Rion’s death had wounded Charlotte too. She had been bottling her feelings up thus far but, having finally given them a voice, she could contain them no longer and tears started to stream down her cheeks in large drops.

Not even Sol could refuse her like this.

“...I understand. But make it brief, please.”

“Sir Sol?!”

“It’s fine, miss Venus. Lady Charlotte would not betray our masters.”

“If you’re willing to say this much... Follow me, ma’am.”

Venus was still not fully satisfied with this outcome but she could not refuse when Sol gave his assent. So she beckoned to Charlotte to have her follow inside.

Arnold attempted to use the chance to get in as well but—

“Lady Fatillas only, Highness. Those are still married woman’s chambers.”

—he was stopped by Sol.

“...I understand.”



Once Charlotte entered Ariel’s room, everybody else returned to the conference room to resume the meeting. The topic of discussion shifted to the damage Bandeaux had suffered.

Sol was of the opinion that with citizens taking restoration of the territory into their own hands, while guided by plans devised by local administration, there was no need for outside help.

However, the politics of the Kingdom would not allow that.

“You need to accept support from the Crown.”

Frederick was adamant in his opposition to Sol’s plan.

“As I have explained, sir, we do not need it.”

“But the Crown needs to be seen giving it. Royal armies were not present on the field of the final battle against the Demon God, if we are not seen supporting Bandeaux revival as well, there will be general unrest.”

All the more so given that the hero, Rion Frey, lost his life in this fight. Contemplating citizens reaction to all this was downright scary.

“...Shall we just accept this land be exploited by delegated officials once again?”

A lot of money could be extracted from the royal treasury with the excuse of financing the restoration and any job with such a prospect was a tasty morsel for any government official.

“I will not allow such a thing to happen.”

“With all due respect, sir, it will happen whether you allow it or not. The memories of administrators sent from the palace preying on this land are still fresh.”

“That may be true, however...”

The deep distrust locals had to central government officials had not disappeared yet and the recent events had even reinforced it. Having some be sent here would lead to a backlash.

“There really is no need for support from the Crown, sir.”

“But you—”

All that said, Sol’s word carried no authority in this discussion. The final say on the matter would belong to the next lord of Bandeaux, whoever would that person be. Just as worried Frederick was about to point that out, Arnold cut into the discussion.

“I shall be the next lord of this barony.”

“Your Highness?”

Not just the Knight Commander, everybody present was surprised by Arnold’s sudden proclamation.

“I believe that to be the best method available to us.”

“That may be, Highness, but what is His Majesty going to say?”

Frederick was not opposed to Arnold’s idea, but he was unsure of the King’s reaction to it.

“Why does Highness wish to do this?”

Sol, on the other hand, was very much against and doubted the Crown Prince’s intentions.

“If I do not, the appointment will be a source of conflict and competition amongst the nobles. None of those pursuing the title will be doing it out of the goodness of their hearts either. Not when Camargue, the Pleasure Quarter of the East is up for grabs.”

“...Not just the bureaucrats, but even the nobles...”

The worth of this city has been made obvious to many. And it will be worth much more once the burden of the military obligations brought by the geographical location is somehow dealt with.

If a new lord and administration sent here were to do the job diligently, Bandeaux would assuredly prosper. But if people that came here only wanted to line their pockets, its value to the Kingdom would be wasted.

“What does Highness plan to do with Lady Frey once the appointment is confirmed?”

Sol was not oblivious to the wider picture, but he valued Ariel’s safety more.

“I... plan to let her do as she wishes.”

“Is that so...”

The room was suddenly filled with unease. Those attending were rather concerned about Arnold’s intentions.

If he were to try something now that Rion was gone, his already tarnished reputation would become unsalvageable.

And most of those present were bound by duty not to let that happen.

“...Your Highness, —”

The moment Lambert resolved himself to speak his mind, the door to the room slammed open with a loud bang.

And when everyone turned to see what is this ruckus all about, they saw Charlotte on the threshold with even more determination in her eyes than Lambert was showing.

“Your Highness! Prince Arnold, I have a request!” she nearly shouted as she walked to where the Crown Prince was sitting.

“...Y-Yes, my lady?”

Arnold was completely overwhelmed by Charlotte’s aura.

“Please marry me!”

“Pardon?”

“Make me your wife, Highness!”

“Whaaa!?”

This stunned everyone in the room. A marriage proposal coming from a lady, furthermore one addressed to a Crown Prince of the realm, was simply without precedent.

“I can think of no other way to protect her! Please, Highness! Grant me the strength to do so!”

“...What is this about?”

Well, he had an idea. She wanted the official position of his wife to protect Ariel. The big question was, what on earth would warrant such a step?

“Ariel is—”

“Lady Charlotte!” “Wait!”

Sol and Frederick shouted nearly in unison interrupting the girl mid-word.

“Anyone here not confident of their ability to keep what they hear now an absolute secret needs to leave the room. At once!”

The Knight Commander surveyed his Royal Guards with a strict stare. Many were displaying signs of fear, but nobody rose to leave.

“...Just so we are clear – if anything said here leaks, I will make you suffer the consequences. With my own hands.”

He gave one more strict warning. Well, a threat really. If the information were to leak, people would die. Nevertheless, not a single person left the room.

“Sir Aristes, I, the Commander of the Royal Order of Knights, take personal responsibility to keep the following discussion confidential. On second thought, that’s not a proper way to go about it. Sir Aristes, I swear on my honor as a knight that nothing said here will ever leave this room.”

Indeed, a personal pledge was more appropriate in this place and situation, than one of a Kingdom's official.

"...I accept, sir Dawson."

Sol decided to put his faith in the old man's word now that the Knight Commander declared he would put his life on the line if things turned bad.

"Now then, what is it about Ariel?"

Seeing that Sol was content to carry on, Arnold went straight to the point.

"She is with child."

"What..."

Groans echoed throughout the room. Everyone understood the significance of those words. The first royal grandchild, a progeny of the second prince who was a hero to the Kingdom. This was a grave political issue.

"I do not want the child, or the mother, swallowed by a political storm."

"I know how you feel Sol... but I fear this is impossible."

Arnold was perfectly aware that even if the Crown left the pair alone, other factions would not. If the child would be born a boy, it would be a perfect tool to further all kinds of ambitions. Who wouldn't want a potential future heir to the throne to follow their beck and call?

"That is why it must be kept a secret, Highness."

"Maybe you are right... Charlotte, your words just now. How does marrying me protect Ariel?"

Arnold asked Charlotte once more, still struggling to connect her marriage proposal to Rion's child.

"Ah, yes. Highness, I have thought what can I do to protect her and rather than keeping it a secret..."

“...Yes?”

“Nobody will be able to tell now, but the pregnancy will be hard to hide once her belly grows larger. And even if you manage that, once she gives birth it will be obvious whose child it is when she is seen with one.”

“This is true.”

“I do not want her and her child to live a life of a prisoner in their own rooms. Would that not make it seem like it is unwanted?”

“...It would.”

Rion’s life had been like that. Even though he hadn’t been really unwanted, the heterochromia had made it seem like so. Charlotte was adamant that the child should not share the fate of the father.

“Alright, so how is a marriage to His Highness a solution to that problem?”

The Knight Commander couldn’t see the connection either.

“...Nobody would know if the birth happens in the Inner Palace.”

“Hmm, true. There is no one alive that would dare leak anything that happens there.”

The Inner Palace was where the Queen and the royal concubines resided. It also housed rooms of the Crown Prince. Only a select, very limited group of people and staff could ever enter it and even those employees couldn’t come and go at will. As a private space of the royal family it, was subjected to various strict measures aimed at preventing information leaks and made for an ideal place to hide secrets.

“What do you plan to do once the child is born? A child raised there is recognized as royalty by default.”

“It won’t be a problem as long as we manage to hide the fact that the child is Rion’s, right?”

“What?”

“I... am saying we should raise it as my child.”

“Can... Can you please repeat that?”

This idea was truly unexpected. So out of the left field, in fact, that lesser men could question Charlotte’s sanity. If she was to marry Arnold and raise Ariel’s child as her own, the child would be treated as the offspring of the Crown Prince. A boy would automatically become second in line to the throne and a future crown prince once his adopted father inherited the crown.

“Only until it grows up, Lord Dawson. Then, as long as it learns to protect itself, it will be able to do as it wishes. Even leave.”

“But the right to succession—”

“—will not be a problem if His Highness takes me as a consort instead of your first wife. Once he marries a rightful Queen, the right of succession will go with her children.”

“So what you desire is just the rank itself?”

“Yes, Lord Dawson.”

As long as she would be allowed to live in the Inner Palace as Arnold’s consort they could give Rion’s child protection due to the Crown Prince’s family and keep it out of the political maelstrom. The idea was not perfect by any means, but it was pretty solid at its core. And, at the very least, vastly superior to leaving Ariel and the child in Bandeaux.

“...Why go so far? This will not make anyone happy, you know.”

The marriage, the family life, all this would be just a charade. By going through with this, Charlotte, a woman no longer in love with Arnold, would be sacrificing an important aspect of her life for somebody else.

“It may be... But we can make the child happy. We will definitely make the child happy.”

“...I see.”

The resolve was obvious from her words and the Knight Commander questioned her no more. What Charlotte hadn’t mentioned was that she was prepared to be the child’s mother for life in Ariel’s place. She fully expected Ariel to commit suicide to follow

Rion as soon as it was born safely. She would, of course, do everything in her power to keep Ariel from doing that, but she was determined to look after the child if those attempts failed. She would also need strength. No matter what. Right now she had nothing she could call on apart from being a daughter of a Marquess. To protect Ariel and her child, she would need more than that. Even if it cost her the ties to her own House. By marrying Arnold, she would be able to borrow some of the power the Crown Prince had at his disposal. It wouldn't be hers, but it would still be more reliable than her own family. She had no illusions, if the existence of Rion's child came to light, House Fatillas would be at the forefront of the political effort to make use of it.

'Why go so far?' Frederick's question echoed in her thoughts.

Because she loved Rion. Even she found it strange that this feeling alone could draw so much determination out of herself. Oh, she had some feelings of sympathy for Ariel and a desire for atonement too, but would just that really be enough to sacrifice so much for others? Maybe, but she wasn't convinced.

In the end, she didn't know what moved her to go that far. Destiny? This felt somewhat accurate, but she had never cared much for fate. However, for the lack of a better reason, it would have to do. Charlotte was resolved to ride the wave of that destiny, whatever it might be. She would put her faith in that mysterious feeling in her heart that whispered to her to do so.

# Chapter 82

## Ariel's Resolution

It went without saying that a crown prince's marriage was not a matter for him and his desired partner to decide on alone. As with the wider aristocracy, the politics had no concern for actual feelings of the prospective groom and bride.

Therefore, while Arnold had not given an answer to Charlotte's proposal when it had been made, he spent the entire trip back to the capital planning how to steer the conversation in the palace to make it possible. He was, at the same time, fully aware that the King would have the final say on the matter.

However, his plans to have the matter ushered carefully, until his father had no choice but to agree, failed utterly. He didn't account for his mother who wasn't entirely mentally stable after learning of Rion's demise.

Once Queen Sophia came to know that she had a grandchild, she became the best possible ally Charlotte could wish for. Arnold's Mother brooked no objection to her desire to raise the child personally right here and now. Thus, the two women were of one mind about bringing the baby to the Palace, even if their future relationship would not always be harmonious.

And so, the fate of Ariel had been decided, and she would be brought over to the capital under the official pretext of offering support to the young widow. Nobody would find that relocation strange – having a mother-in-law that lost her son and a wife that lost her husband support each other in their grief was a pretty common thing in the society.

Nevertheless, a certain amount of preparations and adjustments had to be made before Ariel would be able to enter the Inner Palace.

For starters, people to take care of her would have to be designated. Sol, as a representative of Ariel's retainers in Bandeaux, insisted on having the Warrior Maids follow her since he could think of nobody more trustworthy that would consider her well-being as a top priority.

The Crown had no objections in principle as this reduced the number of people that had to learn of the secrets, but accommodating dozens of new arrivals proved difficult in practice. In order to separate Ariel from the other maids employed in the Inner Palace, the arrivals had to be put into their own, new organization reporting directly to the Queen.

But the Palace's Head Housekeeper resisted such a move fiercely to protect the tradition and existing order of the palace's corpus of staff. The fact her objections came from being deeply passionate about principles and not from a desire for personal gain made her really hard to convince.

Eventually, a compromise was reached according to which the Warrior Maids would report to the Crown Prince and kept separate from staff attached to the royal couple and royal consorts.

This made it publicly known that Arnold would likely soon welcome a wife and only those with more detailed knowledge of the circumstances held suspicions towards the Queen's scheme.

The Inner Palace's structure also had to undergo some reconstruction to isolate a portion of the Inner Palace from the surrounding structures. This, naturally, required time and would be still ongoing even when Ariel finally moved in.

The completion of the work was further delayed by the fact renovations had to achieve certain counterintelligence goals as designed by Bravd, the Head of Clan Black. The King would later demand the changes were implemented in the remainder of the palace too.

In the wider world, having Ariel relocate to the capital sunk the Crown Prince's reputation even more. Rumors started to circulating according to which Arnold saw Rion as an eyesore and purposefully abandoned Bandeaux to its own fate during the war to see his younger brother killed. This seemed very fitting for the evil prince described in popular minstrel songs, even if it couldn't be farther from the truth.

Those rumors spread far and wide within the Kingdom once more robbing the Crown of an opportunity to finally acknowledge Rion's lineage. After all, admitting he was of the royal blood now would only further fuel Arnold's bad reputation.

But despite all those challenges, things were mostly progressing as Charlotte expected

them to. The biggest actual obstacle was tied to herself, it was the looming wall of objections named House Fatillas, her own family.

They were very concerned about her marriage with the prince because she would only become a consort. That was completely unacceptable for an aristocratic family of that pedigree and status, so they started to fight fiercely to either make Charlotte a proper queen or to have the union annulled.

The Crown attempted to fend that off with the revelation that a baby had already been conceived, clearly showing a premarital affair had occurred between the two, an unacceptable scandal for a future queen. Furthermore, the government argued, it was highly likely that Lady Fatillas had entrapped the Crown Prince and, as such, no concessions could be made.

House Fatillas, loathing the idea of a scandal, reacted to this with a vehement objection to the marriage in any form. They would handle the matter of the child on their own. The ideas the family had on that subject were so dark that Charlotte felt revolted even thinking about them. This enraged the girl and she demanded all official and legal ties between her and House Fatillas be severed.

This made her family give in at last. Even if she was no longer a member of the House, any scandal she was involved in would be perceived as their scandal anyway, therefore it was better to save face and end up with at least some connection to the royal family through a consort to the crown prince.

But that could not erase the tensions that accumulated between Charlotte and her family in the process. She and Arnold ended up being wed, but a fresh rift opened up between the Crown and House Fatillas.

At the same time, the royal family lost the support of another marquess dynasty, House Windhill.

To be precise, they lost the loyalty of the Marquess Windhill himself. It had been absolutely predictable that Lord Marquess would attempt to take in his widowed daughter expecting such a request to be accepted as a matter of course.

Especially now that the charges against Vincent and Ariel were widely recognized to be false.

He saw nothing wrong with wanting his daughter's return now that she shared all the

unmatched contributions of her husband who also happened to be a royal. He was, however, not only refused but even barred from meeting Ariel, shaking his blind devotion to the throne and sowing distrust in his heart.

The Crown would come to rue this in time. They repeated the same mistake they had made in the case of Vincent, they were unable to recognize who should be trusted.

Even though Ariel's belly would be likely conspicuous when meeting her father, the loyal Marquess Windhill would keep the secret as he had no ambition to rule the Kingdom. He was even likely to cooperate in the interest of the realm.

As things happened, a distrust crept into that relationship making things favorable for Erwin, whose position as the heir was now rock solid despite his lack of outstanding contribution in the war.

Lord Windhill's newfound disinterest in the matters of the state and wellbeing of the Kingdom made him withdraw from the big political game and hand over some of the internal family management to his heir. While he still didn't give up on Ariel, still commanded massive influence, and still took care of important matters, as Erwin wasn't ready for that yet, he was effectively retired.

This was a huge step forward for Erwin who found himself with considerable amounts of authority on internal matters. Whether that would prove to be a blessing in the long term remained to be seen, though, since a decline of the Head's authority brought its own share of challenges and ambitious vassals to deal with.

But that was a problem for the future and he would rather celebrate what he gained in the present.

In a stark contrast, Lancelot had lost everything. After the failure that had been the case of Vincent, Lancelot had only been kept as an heir due to his supposed extraordinary talent in military matters.

However, he came out of the war against the Devils with nothing much to show for himself. His middling achievements fell well short of the very high standards expected of an heir and just weren't enough to redeem his earlier blunders.

He was also made responsible for Rion's death.

Young Frey was a very important existence to House Aquasmea's future plans. As a

royal of their bloodline, he was supposed to be the standard bearer of their ambitions in this generation. He had had the lineage, the popularity, and the hate towards the royal family. He had been perfect.

And he had been lost in something so trivial as a war against some monsters because Lancelot believed the words of a dubious hero like Maria.

This was the real reason Lancelot had to go. Lord Marquess Aquasmea simply used other justifications as exaggerated excuses and examples of failure in order to placate his vassals.

He made his former heir into a young fool who had led the House in a wrong direction and couldn't even find his way into a battle that actually mattered. The label stuck.

Lancelot was given a small fief at the far western border of the Kingdom with little ties to the domain of the Marquess himself. It was a very definition of the concept of demotion. Maria came there with him, and they were wed to each other.

The Demon God had been defeated, the Kingdom evaded total destruction. For anyone else, this would be a happy end, but not for Maria the Protagonist.

Protecting the world was never her primary objective. She wanted the Queen's crown as a reward for doing it. And she didn't give up yet. She had plans, and marrying Lancelot to rule over a provincial nowhere was an essential step of turning them into reality. She needed a husband that would do as she desired.

The game had concluded, she was no longer the protagonist.

That meant she was no longer constrained by having to appear to be on the side of justice.

And this new, unrelated to the game story that started to unfold heralded another disaster in the Kingdom's future.



The general area of the slums, while not free of dangers, had turned considerably calmer over recent years. But not enough to make two women in maid uniform escorted by a single man not look very out of place. The locals found the trio very

interesting, but wisely pretended to see nothing. Such was the way of the place. However, the newly changed, lively Slum district attracted certain kind of new people, and there still were those amongst them that didn't know the rules of the place.

"My, my! Such pretty ladies! Won't you have tea with me?"

This one was particularly reckless. A kind that couldn't see through the other people's abilities.

"Is it your treat?"

"Sure is! I'll get you whatever you like!"

"Oh. I wonder what should I go for?"

"You'll have plenty of time to choose in the shop. Want me to show you a good one?"

The man was celebrating already. This was a rare, easy catch where two women were not only interested but also of rare beauty. Sure, the escort was a problem, but that would be dealt with once they entered the hideout. Even if the guard was strong, he would face many gang members there and would be totally outnumbered.

"Who does the shop belong to?" asked the other woman, the one that had been quiet until now.

Honestly, this question should have made the man wary, but he just didn't know any better.

"You'll know once we get there, sweetie."

"...Where is Ain?"

"Ain? Oh, Ain. Yes, he'll be waiting for us at the destination."

To anyone in the know, this was certainly a lie. Only a few people affiliated with the organization would dare refer to Ain so casually in the Slums and a simple hoodlum like this guy would never be one of them.

"...This one is a miss."

“A miss?”

“Oh, we are fine now. Stop being a hindrance and go away, alright?”

“What? What’s with that tone, bitch?! Don’t get carried away just because people are nice to you, yea?”

He was the one actually getting carried away, working himself up so much he failed to keep tabs on his surroundings and didn’t notice an impending calamity.

“Oy! What’s the ruckus about?!”

As soon as the hoodlum raised his voice, a scary face emerged from a side alley. Nowadays, the peace and order of the Slums were maintained by a certain vigilante group and those fighting men were much scarier than an occasional thug kicking up a fuss.

“Hey, it’s that woman who—”

The hoodlum didn’t even get to finish his explanation.

“Oh? Senior Sister? It’s Senior Sister!”

The member of Resist called one of the women ‘Senior Sister’ and only one person carried that moniker in the Slums. Ariel. The street thug didn’t know who Ariel was, but he was well aware of what ‘Senior Sister’ meant. Finally aware of who he picked on, he turned ashen.

“...It has been a long time.”

Paying no more attention to the scared witless bandit, Ariel greeted the man that intervened. She could recognize the face, he was called Nine.

“This outfit... Did anything happen? It does suit Senior Sister wonderfully though,” said the man smiling happily at the sight of Ariel in a maid uniform.

“Thank you, Nine. Am I still the Senior Sister here?”

She had been called that because she had been the wife of the boss. But now Rion was gone, Ain should be the boss, and the title should be hers no longer.

“Of course! What brings Senior Sister here, though?”

“I have a request to make of Ain, can I meet him?”

“Eh? Hasn’t Senior Sister heard? Brother Ain went to look for the Boss.”

“...Eh?”

The unexpected reply made Ariel stiffen.

“Oh... Damn. Was this supposed to be a secret not to raise any expectations? Damn. Senior Sister, please, don’t tell anyone my tongue slipped? Please?”

“...Yes, of course. But... where is Rion?”

Ariel asked the question very timidly. She was still worried this had been some sort of misunderstanding. That the people of the Slums elected a new boss and Ain left to look for that man. She was afraid of having expectations.

“We had reports of sighting in the Hashu Kingdom. One of our folks said he saw Boss and Senior Sister walking together. At first, it seemed that he was mistaken.”

“...Mistaken...”

Her hope appeared to be as short-lived as she feared.

“But Brother Ain said that just changing hair and eye color is easy.”

“...So apart from those two things, everything else...”

“Was a perfect match to the Boss. There can’t be anything else with that kind of beautiful looks he has, right? I believe that too. It... It might be wrong of me to give Senior Sister hope, but...”

“It is fine. So Rion is in Hashu... I see...”

Ariel’s gaze wandered over to Sol. The man bore it silently despite the fact that Venus was kicking his shins at the same time. This convinced Ariel that Rion had really survived.

“Thank you. I will come here again. And do not worry, I shall pretend I know nothing when I meet Ain.”

“Alright. We will contact you when Brother comes back. But won’t coming all the way here be hard while pregnant? Just tell us when you leave the Inner Palace. Well, not that we won’t know anyway.”

“...I shall do just that then.”

It was easy to tell Ariel was pregnant with just a look at her belly, learning where she resided was much harder. But well within the means of Resist. Ariel came to the Slums to borrow the organization’s power. She wanted to ask Ain to become the child’s strength. That turned out to be somewhat premature. Rion was alive. That made her very curious why had he disappeared like that without a single word. She knew there must have been a reason, she refused to believe Rion would ever grow to dislike her enough to abandon her. So she would forgive him for deceiving her about his death. What she wouldn’t forgive, though...

“Sooolll, pray tell... Who is that woman Rion was seen with?”

“...I-I... I wouldn’t have an inkling, My Lady.”

“I see... What a shame. Still, Ain will find him and I shall learn everything about her.”

Sol was clearly lying, but his dedication ever since Rion’s disappearance had been exemplary, so Ariel pried no more. The man must have had his good reasons to not tell her.

“...I somehow doubt it?”

Nobody would believe him that the woman was an embodiment of the world itself. Even he himself wasn’t fully convinced. But he had no doubts she was not human. There was something about her that she just couldn’t hide, something eerie, not unlike the feeling surrounding the Demon God, yet completely different at the same time.

“...If Ain does not manage to find my husband, I will do it myself.”

Ariel misunderstood that Sol was talking about Rion’s location, not the woman’s identity. Not that she would give up either way. She would go looking even at the edges of the known world if required and, if that failed, she would cross the ocean too. But

to prepare for that day, she and the child in her womb had to become strong. Both in body and mind. For the first time in a long while, Ariel smiled boldly. She had regained her will to live. As long as he carried on living, even if not by her side, so would she.



There were actually people observing that scene from the shadows – a certain Rion who was the object of Resist’s search effort and the World in the body of a woman.

“...Ah. She’s angry...”

“That’s not my fault, is it now? Ain’t you happy yet? I kept my promise, let’s go on a journey already!”

The World was unhappy. She didn’t even want Rion to see Ariel again in the first place.

“Promise, eh?”

“What ‘eh’? You made a request, I complied. Are you unhappy now?”

He had demanded one thing of the World before he would separate from Ariel for good – that his wife would be kept safe from harm until the child was born.

“I only asked that you keep them safe. I didn’t ask that you make my child royalty, or that you make the Crown Prince its father.”

“Like I had any choice? I’m just a fraction of the world, without the same kind of influence. At best I can stimulate and amplify feelings that are already there in people.”

“...Are you saying someone desired for Ariel to end up in this situation?”

“Not just someone, many people did. The flow of events is decided by the motives of many people clashing together.”

“...I see.”

That was how she had played around with him in the past, by stimulating people’s emotions and desires. His eyes turned steely while he reminisced about that past.

“Hey, it’s not my fault things ended up like this. It was that stupid woman protagonist

who bumped into the bad ending. She made everything become this way.”

She misunderstood the reasons behind Rion’s sudden anger and started making excuses regarding Ariel’s situation.

“I’m not angry.”

“Cool. I can’t do anything else anyway, you know? The game has ended, neither the scenario nor my interference can impact the wider world right now.”

“I see...”

He had always waited for this moment, for the game to end. Yet, now that it had arrived, he still found himself bound.

“Good. Now starts the great romance with you and me in the lead roles. Do look forward to that, okay?”

“No such thing will happen...”

A great romance or not, Rion’s story didn’t finish yet. The incoming turbulent times required a hero and Rion happened to be the ideal person for the role.



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